UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

# THEATRICAL RE/ENACTMENTS OF MENNONITE IDENTITY IN THE PLAYS OF VERALYN WARKENTIN AND VERN THIESSEN

BY

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# ABSTRACT

The Mennonites, a distinct ethnic and religious community, have traditionally shunned the arts, including theatre; however, in recent years the Mennonite community in North America, and for my purposes Winnipeg, has produced a significant number of writers, actors, and directors for the stage. *Theatrical Re/Enactments of Mennonite Identity in the Plays of Veralyn Warkentin and Vern Thiessen* first looks at the history of Mennonite drama, then follows recent developments in the work of two contemporary playwrights, Veralyn Warkentin and Vern Thiessen. In investigating their work, I focus on four plays that depict a range of disjunctions between artistic expression and religious beliefs and practices.

In the first chapter, I document past theatrical activity that emerged despite the Mennonites' declared opposition to formal dramatic presentations. In the second chapter, I outline the career of playwright Veralyn Warkentin and note how her plays *Chastity Belts* and *Mary and Martha* frame the conflict between religious submission and artistic freedom in terms of the community's treatment of women. In the third chapter, I look at two of Vern Thiessen's plays, *The Courier* and *The Resurrection of John Frum*, and examine how the different social environments in which he places his characters effect a disruption and critique of traditional Mennonite assumptions.

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# INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s when Mennonite society began to open up to broader society, community leaders asked themselves the question whether it was right for Mennonites to attend the theatre. Today they ask how theatre can assist them in transmitting communal and religious values. Reflecting on an increasing openness towards theatrical enterprises, William Gering, a Mennonite youth pastor in the United States, observed in 1961,

> [T]he Mennonites . . . stand on a threshold in their historical position of opposition to theatrical enterprises. The more conservative groups believe that stepping across this threshold and lifting the restrictions means losing their faith. The more progressive Mennonites believe the threshold must inevitably be crossed. They seek to cross it with discretion and reserve accepting what can be used for the good of their faith and rejecting that which is detrimental. Time alone will tell which attitude will help most in perpetuating and preserving the basic aspects of the Mennonite faith.[1]

In his study, Gering demonstrated how technological and educational advances, which were responsible for assimilating post-war Mennonite society into the mainstream, also softened opposition to "worldly amusements" such as the theatre. Gering was right. More than 30 years later, a threshold has indeed been crossed, though perhaps not in a way Gering might have expected.

Numerous references in Gering's study to conference resolutions and treatises against theatre attendance confirm that Mennonites are a community that has traditionally been suspicious of, often hostile to, all manifestations of theatre. However, much has changed in the intervening thirty-five years. Mennonite educational institutions such as the Canadian Mennonite Bible College and Concord College, both in Winnipeg, have introduced drama courses into their curriculum. Bethel College in Newton, Kansas, and Goshen College in Indiana already boast thriving theatre departments. Rosthern Junior College, a high school in Saskatchewan, has developed an extensive drama program, and the "school play" is a popular annual event at other high schools as well. Furthermore, plays are produced at church and world conferences.[2] A cursory glance at the community events calendar in the *Mennonite Reporter* testifies to theatrical events regularly taking place in the Mennonite community.[3]

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[1] William M. Gering, *Mennonite Attitudes Toward Theatrical Enterprises*, Master of Art's thesis, Indiana U, 1961, 77.

This change in Mennonite attitudes toward the theatre is part of a larger trend of literary and artistic development in Mennonite circles, which according to Al Reimer, Professor Emeritus at the University of Winnipeg, is primarily a Canadian phenomenon.[4] The Canadian West, not the U.S. as Gering expected, is the locus of artistic activity.

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[2] For example, Steve Shank performed *Revelation* at the Mennonite World Conference in Winnipeg, July 1990. Fraser Valley Arts and Peace Festival, sponsored by local Mennonite churches and Mennonite Central Committee, produced *The Shunning* by Patrick Friesen in August 1993.

[3] An arbitrary sampling of the events calendar in the *Mennonite Reporter* reveals a variety of theatre productions, mostly school related. The week of October 17, 1994 listed: a drama presentation at Bethany Bible Institute sponsored by the Bethany convention, Saskatchewan; dinner theatre at Rosthern Junior College, Saskatchewan; *Tom Sawyer* by the grade 11 drama class (Ontario, school unnamed).

The week of November 1, 1993 listed: Mennonite Collegiate Institute's fall drama, *Quiet in the Land*, Manitoba; Dinner and Drama Night by the Mennonite Collegiate Institute Alumni Association, Manitoba; *Twelfth Night* by Rockway Collegiate Grade 11 class, Ontario.

The week of March 9, 1992 listed: Menno Simons Christian School's spring drama, Alberta; storytelling workshop at Wilmot Fellowship Hall, Ontario; Rockway Mennonite Collegiate's creative and performing arts evening.

[4] Al Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1993) 1.

Since the 1962 publication of Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many,*[5] Mennonite writing has gained increasing critical acclaim in Canada. Rudy Wiebe was the first Mennonite writer to enter the Canadian "mainstream". He was followed by fiction writers Armin Wiebe, Sandra Birdsell, and Rosemary Nixon, and poets Di Brandt, David Waltner-Toews, Patrick Friesen, and Sarah Klassen, among others. Publications of fiction and poetry as well as several anthologies[6] of Mennonite writing verify the claim by Hildi Froese Tiessen, literature professor at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario, that "among the minority-culture literary communities in Canada, few, it could be argued, are at present more productive — or more visible as a literary community — than the Mennonites."[7] Besides literature, visual and plastic arts have also gained increasing recognition through exhibitions by Mennonite artists.[8] Curator Priscilla Reimer observes that "in recent years there has been a veritable explosion of productivity in the visual arts and increasingly artists who were nurtured in the Mennonite tradition are distinguishing themselves."[9]

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[5] Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1962.

[6] The first anthology of Mennonite writing celebrated the centennial year of Mennonites in Canada and was produced primarily for a Mennonite readership: William De Fehr, et. al., eds., *Harvest: Anthology of Mennonite Writing in Canada* (Winnipeg: Centennial Committee of the Mennonite Historical Society of Manitoba, 1974). Later anthologies, all edited or guest edited by Hildi Froese Tiessen, are aimed at a wider readership and include *Liars and Rascals: Mennonite Short Stories* (Waterloo: U of Waterloo P, 1989); *Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*, a special issue of *The New Quarterly: New Directions in Canadian Writing* 10.1-2 (1990); special issues of *Prairie Fire* on Canadian Mennonite Writing 11.2 (1990) and on Patrick Friesen 13.1 (1992); and *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*, ed. by Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe (Waterloo: U of Waterloo P, 1992).

[7] Tiessen, introduction, *Mennonite/s Writing* 9.

[8] Besides solo exhibits, artists received wide exposure through collective exhibits such as the "Mennonite Bicentennial Visual Arts Exhibit" at the Harbourfront, Toronto, 1986 and "Mennonite Artist: Insider as Outsider" at Main/Access Gallery, Winnipeg, 1990. The annual Festival of Art and Music at Polo Park, Winnipeg and the Fraser Valley Arts and Peace Festival provide venues for Mennonite artists and craft workers.

Mennonite magazines and newspapers reflect the changes taking place on the artistic and literary scene. Although many church papers still ignore the arts,[10] magazines such as *Mennonite Life*, *Festival Quarterly*, and the now defunct *Mennonite Mirror* consistently document cultural developments. The bi-weekly *Mennonite Reporter* features an arts page in every issue. In 1946 the editor of *Mennonite Life* prayed, "Would God that I could see a new generation of poets and artists arise among us. But even if I do not see my hopes realized in my life-time, new poets will come."[11] If the press is any indication of general attitudes toward the arts, it appears that the Mennonites are slowly, yet increasingly, becoming more aware and appreciative of writers in their midst.

A partial explanation of the Mennonite literary phenomenon can be found in the way in which Mennonites view themselves and their relation to the outside world. Since the Second World War, Mennonites have welcomed greater participation in Canadian society. Increased professionalism and career diversification combined with migration to urban centres scattered close-knit communities and opened up greater interaction and dialogue with mainstream society. The notion that vital art is born out of a clash of cultures certainly holds true for the Mennonites. The tension between integration and resistance to Canadian culture has produced an exciting body of Mennonite writing. For theatre in particular, it should be noted that assimilation into mainstream culture has not only changed negative attitudes toward theatrical enterprises, as Gering predicted, but has also resulted in active participation in the creation of plays and theatre programmes.

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[9] Priscilla B. Reimer, *Mennonite Artist: The Insider as Outsider* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1990) 5.

[10] Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices* 70.

[11] J. H. Janzen, "The Literature of the Russo-Canadian Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* Jan. 1946: 28.

Although I am not Mennonite neither by birth nor by confession, my investigation of Mennonite drama is informed by my interest in the function of art within a Christian religious context. I am interested in dramatic works that develop out of an intimate engagement with a specific religious tradition while critically examining it. As a member of the close-knit, and often insular, Christian Reformed, Dutch immigrant community, I have experienced the tensions that arise when an ethnic as well as a religious identity must be negotiated in the primarily secular climate of Canadian culture. I am particularly interested in observing the radical changes that the forces of assimilation are generating in the historically even more isolated Mennonite community.

Like the Dutch Christian Reformed community, the Mennonites have maintained their distinctiveness primarily through separate church, school, and welfare institutions. But, unlike the Dutch and most other immigrant communities, the Mennonites have a history of perpetuating a position of extreme isolation and separation, characterized by a rejection of mainstream culture. In the past, the Mennonites approached artistic expressions with suspicion, yet they were not completely successful in stamping out their theatrical impulses. I believe that the continuing presence of theatrical activity — no matter how faint — was a healthy force in shaping a distinctive Mennonite identity, and suggests a dynamic relationship between the artist and the community. Therefore, in my first chapter, I will examine diverse instances of theatrical activities that are significant markers in the development of a nascent theatrical tradition. Included in this chapter is original research that I have conducted on early twentieth-century Russian-Mennonite papers debating the value of theatre. Also outlined here is my critical overview of the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre during its twenty-year history. Although my historical investigations uncover a number of striking cultural incidences, clearly work remains to be done that is outside the scope of this thesis.

The last two chapters focus specifically on the achievements of two contemporary Mennonite playwrights, Veralyn Warkentin and Vern Thiessen, who by becoming mainstream artists have had to directly address issues of assimilation. Selecting dramatists for discussion on the basis of ethnicity assumes that a distinct cultural milieu leaves a discernible effect on playwriting. The purpose of my thesis is not to impose artificially a shared Mennonite aesthetic or artistic world-view on these playwrights; but, where warranted, to uncover similarities in their shaping of certain common themes. My chosen playwrights both confront their Mennonite heritage and traditions, although I would not claim that their works deal exclusively with Mennonite subjects or themes or that they speak for the whole Mennonite community. Often the traditions inform the work in more subversive ways, as I hope to show in my thesis. I chose to work on Warkentin's *Chastity Belts* and *Mary and Martha*, plays which include a feminist critique of Mennonite institutions, because I share her concern in the problematic alliance of feminist and Christian commitments. Thiessen's plays address survival issues of persecuted minorities in hostile dominant societies. *The Courier* and *The Resurrection of John Frum*, in particular, highlight the power relations between minority and majority cultures.

Despite their treatment of crucial Mennonite concerns, Warkentin's and Thiessen's plays have not been analyzed in Mennonite scholarship and have received scant reviews in the Mennonite press. Mainstream Canadian newspapers and magazines on the other hand have reviewed their plays, but not from a distinct Mennonite perspective. Notwithstanding an apparent neglect in Mennonite circles, I believe that a study of these two playwrights will bring to light new developments in the increasing body of Mennonite literature, because Warkentin and Thiessen represent a younger generation than the writers usually mentioned in academic papers or included in anthologies of Mennonite writing. The older writers were raised in rural Mennonite communities and often needed to leave the community — thereby risking ostracism and a crisis of faith — in order to establish themselves as writers. By contrast, these younger playwrights grew up in the urban centre of Winnipeg and did not feel that the practice of their craft implied an abandonment of their faith.

In order to frame my critical distance yet remain respectful of Mennonite culture, I have chosen to access my material by using Mennonite scholarship concerning aesthetic values. Although my study deals with dramatic writing, I draw on Mennonite scholarship which has addressed itself to literature in general, because its focus on the relationship between artists and society is useful for my study on dramatic explorations of the Mennonite identity. The field of Mennonite literature has attracted such prominent scholars as Canadians Al Reimer and Hildi Froese Tiessen, and Americans John Ruth and Jeff Gundy, whose works represent two diverging critical approaches, those of the Russian Mennonite and the Swiss Mennonite communities, respectively.[12]

John Ruth and Jeff Gundy, the Swiss Mennonite critics, advocate a symbiotic relationship between artists and community through an imaginative examination of traditional Mennonite themes and narratives.[13] By contrast, Russian Mennonite critics Al Reimer and Hildi Froese Tiessen assert that Mennonite artists can speak truthfully about Mennonite society only from the fringes of community life.[14] In their view, artists must maintain a critical distance from the community about which they write or compromise standards of artistic excellence. What Reimer and Tiessen seem to ignore is that Ruth and Gundy are not concerned so much with subjecting artists to communal ideology and judgement but rather with encouraging artists to consider the aesthetic possibilities of their tradition and thereby to challenge "prophetically" the dominant narratives of North American culture. Reimer and Tiessen observe artists speaking prophetically to their own community. There is some irony in this development; Mennonite artists have the potential to confront the mainstream literary canon with narratives from a different world-view, but instead their stories of Mennonite life challenge the community of origin.

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[12] Elmer Suderman, himself a Russian Mennonite, contrasts Al Reimer and John Ruth and finds much to be commended in both the Swiss and Russian Mennonite approaches to literature, in "Mennonites, the Mennonite Community, and Mennonite Writers," *Mennonite Life* Sept. 1992: 21-6.

Although the Swiss and Russian Mennonite models of art and society are useful in my thinking about the relationship of artists to their material, these models are primarily concerned with literary fiction and offer no analytical treatment of drama as an art form. In this thesis, I will attempt a tentative definition of Mennonite theatre as an art form that mediates between forces of preservation and acculturation. Like other ethnic minorities in Canada, the Mennonites struggle to define their distinctiveness in a nation that tolerates, even officially endorses, certain differences, but prefers to erase others. Low-German literature, song-fests, and theatre productions in the German language are cultural productions financially supported by the Canadian Heritage Ministry. Unfortunately, with the exception of music, these cultural elements have not traditionally defined what it means to be Mennonite. Mennonite culture is distinguished by its German language, preserved and transmitted through oral traditions, and its maintenance of religious distinctiveness. These "ethnic" traits are not easily packaged for multi-cultural consumption.

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[13] See John Ruth, *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art*, focal pamphlet 29 (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1978) 21-4, 43-5, 58-9, 68-71; John Ruth, "Knowing the Place for the First Time: A Response to Hildi Froese Tiessen," *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Calvin Wall Redekop, asst. ed. Samuel J. Steiner (Waterloo: Institute for Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies; Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1988) 254-57; Jeff Gundy, "Voice and History in Patrick Friesen," *Mennonite/s Writing in Canada*, ed. Hildi Froese Tiessen, special issue of *The New Quarterly: New Directions in Canadian Writing* 10.1-2 (1990): 141-42; Jeff Gundy, "Humility in Mennonite Literature," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63.1 (1989): 10-11, 21.

[14] See Al Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present* (Newton, KS: Mennonite, 1993) 56-73; Reimer, "Coming in Out of the Cold," *Why I am a Mennonite: Essays on Mennonite Identity* (Kitchener: Herald, 1988) 264-65; Reimer, "Who's Afraid of Mennonite Art?" *Mennonite Mirror* Jan. 1989, rpt. in *Embracing the World: Two Decades of Canadian Mennonite Writing*, special issue of the *Mennonite Mirror* June-July 1990: 74; Hildegard (Hildi) Froese Tiessen, "The Author as Stranger: Mennonite Literature Looks Homeward," *Internal and External Perspectives on Amish and Mennonite Life*, eds. Werner Enniger, Joachim Raith, and Karl-Heinz Wandt (Essen: Unipress, 1986) 45-6; Tiessen, Introduction, *Mennonite/s Writing in Canada* 10; Tiessen, "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding," *Mennonite Identity*, ed. Calvin Wall Redekop, asst. ed. Samuel J. Steiner, 245-46.

In my work I find it useful to note that ethnic difference is often maintained by resisting assimilation and voluntarily imposing practices that ensure separateness or, for later generations, a nostalgic recovery of such strategies. Particularly relevant to this thesis is the Mennonite history of displacement and transience. Sustained persecution and a highly sectarian religious outlook contributed to Mennonite settlement patterns that reinforced social separation and community autonomy. As we shall see, the complete annihilation of the Mennonite colonies in Russia produced a collective emotional trauma that still reverberates in plays today.

Issues of religious separateness and artistic production are part of the larger debate about the cultural effects of Christianity. Ever since its inception, Christianity has operated on two levels: that is, the human and the divine, the physical and the spiritual, the temporal world and the eternal world. The inherent tension between involvement in this world and preparing for the next is especially strong in the non-conforming Mennonite tradition. H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*[15] describes five basic ways that Christians can conceive of Christ, and themselves, relating to the culture in which they live. As critic Harry Loewen has shown, Niebuhr's framework is useful in understanding how different approaches to the arts have shaped Mennonite cultural life and institutions in specific times and places.[16] Of Niebuhr's five categories, I find his Christ Against Culture, the Christ of Culture, and Christ the Transformer of Culture, most helpful in distinguishing between different Mennonite approaches to art. Less applicable are his categories Christ Above Culture and Christ and Culture in Paradox, which recognize the duality between Christian and cultural principles while accepting the inescapable authority of secular society, a position inimical to the Mennonite faith, that has always sought to base community life solely upon Christian principles.

Sociologist Calvin Redekop puts forth an alternative typology, which incorporates some of Niehbuhr's insights to explain the current Mennonite situation.[17] I find Redekop's typology equally useful in assessing past Mennonite approaches to culture, and I will make use of Redekop's analysis in Chapter 1. What Redekop calls the

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[15] New York: Harper, 1951.

[16] See Harry Loewen, "The Anabaptist View of the World: The Beginning of a Mennonite Continuum?" *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural, and Literary Essays Dealing With Mennonite Issues*, ed. Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion, 1980) 85-95. For another insightful critique of Niebuhr see Paul A. Marshall, "Overview of Christ and Culture," *Church and Canadian Culture*, ed. Robert E. VanderVennen (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1991). Other useful sources for a general discussion of Christianity and the fine arts include cited works by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Calvin Seerveld, H. R. Rookmaaker, Leland Ryken, and Gerardus van der Leeuw.

[17] *Mennonite Society* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1989) 117-22.

Retreatist Approach stems from an attitude akin to Niehbuhr's definition of "Christ Against Culture." As the dominant approach of the Old Order Mennonites, the Retreatist Approach stringently limits freedom of expression, allowing only the creation of artifacts, such as quilts, which conform to community traditions but do not self-consciously reflect on those traditions. In sharp contrast to the retreatist types, the Integrationist Approach, similar to Niehbuhr's "Christ of Culture" category, considers the aesthetic and intellectual life of the mainstream culture fully compatible with a Mennonite religious worldview. This Integrationist Approach is most characteristic of Dutch Mennonites. Mediating between these two approaches is the Cooptive Approach which, reminiscent of Niehbuhr's category "Christ the Transformer of Culture," entails the idea that art is not evil so long as it is used for the right objective. According to Redekop, the Cooptive Approach is the dominant position of most North American Mennonite congregations.

I find Redekop's typology of Christianity and culture a helpful framework in understanding the Mennonite spectrum of rejection and acceptance of theatre as a distinctive art form. In distinguishing between different approaches to theatre, I like to speak in terms of strategies that are used to constrain and regulate. First is the *prohibition* strategy which avoids all forms of theatre and amusement on the basis of its "worldliness." Prohibition was the dominant strategy of Mennonite society until the turn of the century;[18] however, even during extreme avoidance of theatre, the theatrical impulse expressed itself in skits, circle dances, and other family games. Second is a strategy of selective *appropriation*, which strictly regulated a limited sampling of existing plays. Between the war years, Mennonites began reading plays and even performed some classic works through structured activities in youth clubs, literary societies, and college drama clubs. This second strategy endorsed some theatrical activity but only within the confines of community life. Third, during the 1960s and its aftermath, a *cooptive* strategy swept through North American churches,[19] including Mennonite denominations. Mennonite churches began to consider theatre a useful tool for evangelism. This is the period in which Gering wrote his thesis, and his observation that progressive Mennonites seek "what can be used for the good of their faith and rejecting that which is detrimental"[20] serves as an example of the cooptive strategy.

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[18] Melvin Gingerich, "Amusements," *Mennonite Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement*, ed. Harold S. Bender, 4 vols. (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955-59) I: 112-13.

Today, Mennonites are most comfortable with theatre as an instrument for the building up of the Christian faith. For example, *CMC Nexus*, a Mennonite paper, published an article that promoted drama as "a way to communicate the gospel effectively." The writer considered drama useful in creating an "emotional connection" which "may result in a person coming to know the Lord, or at least becoming aware of a loving and caring heavenly father." In this approach, drama serves a utilitarian function: it presents a "solution" to "very real problems" and "personal conflicts."[21] Even some instructors at Mennonite Bible colleges who do not share this utilitarian view, nevertheless testify to its wide-spread acceptance.[22]

A utilitarian view of drama has a number of drawbacks, not the least of which is the limits it places on artistic freedom and licence: "The medium of the message, i.e., the art form, will not draw attention to its uniqueness or cleverness, but will reveal the 'word of God' with clarity and power," admonishes one Mennonite Bible College professor against formal innovation.[23] It seems to me that a utilitarian view contains kernels of the selective appropriation strategy in that it seeks to keep plays under community censure. Playwrights had better work within the confines of their own community rather than engage artistic developments in mainstream culture. The same professor forewarns artists whose "chief desire is to be God's vessel" that they will run the risk of incurring "misunderstanding and perhaps ostracism from elite artistic society."[24] Of course, sensitivity to ostracism raises the related question: do artists risk ostracism from the Mennonite community if they feel called to challenge *its* values and practices?[25]

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[19] See Peter Senkbeil, "Why Christian Theatre is Exploding," *Christianity and the Arts* Feb.-Apr. 1997: 4-8.

[20] Gering 77.

[21] Ken Hildebrandt, "Conflict and Connections," *CMC Nexus* Dec. 1994: 4.

[22] Personal interviews with Kathy Unruh of Concord College, and Dietrich Bartel and Esther Wiebe at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Nov. 1994.

For many in the Mennonite community, theatrical expression is confined to the classics, such as Shakespeare, and to plays with a clear didactic intent. The farther theatre strays from these models, the more difficult it is to approve. Based on the foregoing observations, it may be said that the current utilitarian view holds theatre hostage for didactic purposes and hinders it from flourishing in its own right. In Mennonite writing about art, with the exception of the literary scholars mentioned above, there is little evidence of an outright *transformational* strategy, which would negotiate between traditional notions of community and broader mainstream concerns. Adopting such a strategy would encourage the community to recognize within its theological foundations not merely an exhortation to insularity but rather the value of taking a more expansive view.[26]

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[23] George Wiebe, "Faithfulness to the Arts," *Call to Faithfulness: Essays in Canadian Mennonite Studies*, eds. Henry Poetteker and Rudy A. Regehr (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1972) 207.

[24] George Wiebe 207.

[25] This was Rudy Wiebe's experience in 1962 with the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and again in 1983 with *My Lovely Enemy*. See Al Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices* 66-7.

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[26] A transformational approach to culture has been well articulated by writers of the Reformed persuasion. See Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* (Leicester, Eng.: Inter-Varsity, 1978) and Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Tuppence, 1995).

# CHAPTER 1

# MENNONITE ARTISTS: BETWEEN ISOLATION AND ASSIMILATION

In this chapter I will investigate past examples of artistic expression which manifested themselves despite opposition to the theatre. As we will see, the more isolated a Mennonite community became, the less chance there was of formalized artistic expression. This is not to say that theatre never took place in the Mennonite community; however, whenever theatre appeared self-consciously, it clashed with community censure over everything "worldly". Plays that addressed religious topics were considered especially dangerous to the prevalent Mennonite worldview that regarded religion as a private experience mediated only by community traditions which enforced a separate lifestyle. During these times, Mennonites produced what may be called pseudo-theatrical activities, which included storytelling, circle games, mumming, and skits. These theatrical prototypes helped cement Mennonite social cohesion, but they did not directly confront the ideological foundations of community life. In contrast to theatrical activities that remained "invisible" as culture, a brief overview of the Dutch, Russian, and Canadian situations reveal that when Mennonites began to participate in mainstream society, theatre emerged as a separate art form. This chapter deals with these historical developments as they have manifested themselves through the Mennonite diaspora, using the categories of Christianity and culture as defined in my Introduction.

## I. Dramatic Literature in the Dutch Republic

Mennonites living in Holland during the seventeenth century formed a distinct religious minority, yet they actively participated in all aspects of mainstream society, with the exception of military and civic offices which, according to the Mennonite faith, operated contrary to pacifist principles. The Dutch Mennonites enjoyed a large measure of religious tolerance, and even though Calvinism emerged as the official religion of the young Dutch Republic, the Mennonites were free to build meeting houses and to practise the "peculiarities" of their faith.[27] Living in relative freedom and prosperity, the Dutch Mennonites embraced the cultural opportunities available to them, and those living in the urban centres contributed to the artistic and literary life of the nation.

According to Cornelius Krahn, an influx of culturally sophisticated Flemish Mennonites at the beginning of the century combined with a life of unprecedented prosperity facilitated Mennonite cultural development in seventeenth-century Holland.[28] In the field of visual arts, Carel van Mander, Jacob van Ruisdael, and Govert Flinck achieved success.[29] Noted poets and writers include Jan Philipsz Schabaelje,[30] Lambert Hermansz ten Kate, and Joost van den Vondel, called the Milton of Dutch literature.[31] Mennonite contribution to Dutch culture is indeed considerable; hence, editors of the *Mennonite Ency-*

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[27] Significant "peculiarities" of the Mennonite faith include the unorthodox practice of adult baptism, strict church discipline, and the belief in complete separation between church and state.

[28] Krahn, Cornelius Krahn, "Some Cultural Contributions of the Dutch Mennonites," *Proc. of the Sixteenth Conference on Mennonite Educational and Cultural Problems* 16 (1967).

[29] Redekop, *Mennonite Society* 110.

[30] Jan Philipsz Schabaelje's contribution to fictional literature was *Lusthof des Gemoeds* (1645) which in its German (*Die wandelnde Seele*) and English (*The Wandering Soul*) translations became "the most popular Mennonite book ever published." Redekop, *Mennonite Society* 110.

[31] Vondel was born to Mennonite parents and served as a deacon in the Amsterdam congregation from 1616-20, but in 1641 he left the Anabaptist faith for membership in the Catholic Church. Regarding Vondel's religious conversion, some venture that the poet's desire for mystical experience attracted him to the Catholic faith. H. F. W. Jelles and N. van der Zijpp, "Literature, Mennonites in: I. Netherlands," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* III: 355.

*clopedia*[32] chose not to present a comprehensive list of Mennonite literature in The Netherlands. In contrast, all literary materials produced by Mennonites outside of Holland are listed in the *Encyclopedia*.

Much of the enduring literature of the Mennonite faith was written or published in Holland during the seventeenth century and distributed to fellow believers in Switzerland, Germany, and Prussia. In time these writings followed the Mennonite exodus to North America.[33] Popular materials were confessions and songbooks as well as a distinct genre of literature, martyrologies. Martyr stories, letters, and songs were preserved and distributed by the faithful for the encouragement and upbuilding of the faith. The best known collection of these documents is the *Martyr's Mirror* (1660) by Tieleman Jansz van Braght, subtitled "The Bloody Theatre of Anabaptists and defenceless Christians." The *Martyr's Mirror* holds a time-honoured place in Mennonite society. Seeing numerous editions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including German translations, the book has also received new interest with recent English translations.[34] In many Mennonite homes, especially Swiss, the *Martyr's Mirror* occupied a place of central importance next to the Bible. Despite its celebration of ordinary folk courageously defending the faith, the *Martyr's Mirror* also reinforces "obedience and submission to God and the teachings of the church," according to sociologist Calvin Redekop.[35] The historical significance of the *Martyr's Mirror*, both as a document of suffering and as a manual for submissive behaviour, stimulates the imagination of contemporary playwrights.[36]

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[32] Harold S. Bender, ed., 4 vols. (Scottdale, PA: The Mennonite Publishing House, 1955-59).

[33] Krahn, "Some Cultural Contributions" 90, 97.

[34] N. van der Zijpp and Harold S. Bender, "Martyr's Mirror," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* III: 527-28.

[35] Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 1989) 92.

As concerns dramatic writing in seventeenth-century Holland, the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*[37] list numerous dramas written by Mennonite authors and many more by non-Mennonite playwrights, who usually treated Mennonite themes in a satiric manner. Social non-conformity and sectarian theology separated Mennonites from the mainstream culture and rendered them easy prey to non-Mennonite satirists of the day. In his popular comedy *Het Moortje* (1616), the celebrated Bredero lampooned Mennonites' presumed appetite for rich food and drink. Other farcical pieces spoke of Mennonite underhandedness and sanctimoniousness. Thomas Asselijn's hilarious *Jan Klaasz*[38] trilogy (1682-85) made scathing references to noted Mennonite families and caused such public outrage that the magistrate forbade further presentation of the play. As Mennonites came into greater prosperity in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and lost their lower-class "simplicity," they ceased being treated as a public laughing stock.

Prosperity and cultural flourishing brought forth reputable dramas written by Mennonites, including, among others, a passion play by Pieter Langedult; historical dramas by Claas Bruin; *Fabricius* (1720), a tragedy by Sybrand Feitama, a translator of French dramas; and the comedies of Pieter Langendijk which satirize the rich, self-satisfied Dutch merchants and their families. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, critical and historical studies of drama by Mennonites demonstrate their continued interest in the field. Bastiaan Klinkert published a number of studies on Shakespeare; Simon Stijl treated the state of dramatic art and literature of his time in *Leven van Jan Punt* (1781); Christiaan Nicolaas Wybrands chronicled the history of the Amsterdam stage from 1617 to 1772 and wrote a critical work, *Tooneelstudien* (1889); and Aemilius Willem Wybrands researched the ecclesiastical drama of the Middle Ages.

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[36] For example, Veralyn Warkentin, *Mary and Martha*; James Juhnke, *Dirk's Exodus*; Carol Ann Weaver, Carol Penner, and Cheryl Nafziger-Leis, *Quietly Landed?*

[37] H. F. W. Jelles and N. van der Zijp III: 353-74.

[38] Jan Klaasz is the Dutch version of comedia's Harlequin, similar to the British Punch & Judy or the German Hanswurst.

Curiously, dramatic works and studies by Dutch Mennonite authors did not find a broader Mennonite audience in other parts of Europe and North America. This phenomenon raises some interesting questions, for confessional and devotional literature was widely distributed among Mennonites living outside of Holland.[39] Although my research for the present topic did not uncover evidence explaining this phenomenon, a few tentative observations can be made which may prove useful for further study.

The Dutch Anabaptist movement was well represented in urban centres, where Mennonites became acquainted with scientific and cultural innovations of the day. Economic stability and freedom of worship allowed Dutch Mennonites to pursue the finer things of life. Mennonites outside of Holland, by comparison, lived in relatively isolated rural areas. The arrival of Swiss refugees at the beginning of the eighteenth century highlights the stark contrast between Dutch Mennonite sophistication and Swiss simplicity. Mennonite poet Pieter Langendijk published a poem describing the Swiss refugee impressions of the prosperous Dutch brethren:

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[39] Krahn, "Some Cultural Contributions" 90, 97, 100. According to Krahn, devotional material and catechisms were translated into German and later the English language. Reuben Epp attests that Flemish Mennonite ministers and community leaders living in Prussia and the Vistula Delta used the Dutch language in preaching and writing until 1780. *The Story of Low German and Plautdietsch: Tracing a Language Across the Globe* (Hillsboro, KS: Reader's, 1993) 71.

She [simplicity] had no coach with trotting horses
When hither coming down the Rhine in boats
And saw with alarm the brethren at Amsterdam
In unrestrained pomp which brought tears to her eyes. . . .[40]

Dutch Mennonite dramatic accomplishments contain indirect evidence of the common cultural heritage Mennonite artists shared with their non-Mennonite neighbours. Although Dutch Mennonites formed a distinct religious minority noted for different life-style peculiarities, they did not differ ethnically or linguistically from the rest of society. This was certainly not the case for Mennonite groups in Russia and North America. In all countries, with the exception of Holland and Switzerland, Mennonites exist as a displaced people living in a strange land. In the past, these communities resisted assimilation into the mainstream at all costs, often rejecting cultural and artistic developments as worldly trappings. The Dutch, who based their religious separateness on theological grounds instead of ethnic difference, seem to have felt free to participate in the cultural life of their nation without sacrificing spiritual purity.

The foregoing example demonstrates that Mennonite dramatic writing appeared as a natural outcome of the community's integration into mainstream society. Although the apparently uncensored Dutch involvement in mainstream culture may have caused some to question their spiritual integrity, the Dutch Mennonites themselves evidently did not perceive a contradiction between their Christian commitment and artistic creation. The integrationist approach of the Dutch Mennonites brought Mennonite culture to its highest level of achievement in seventeenth-century Holland, although present-day Canadian developments may well rival the Dutch honour.

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[40] Pieter Langendijk, "Swiss Simplicity Lamenting the Corrupted Manners of Many Dutch Mennonites or Non-Resistant Christians," (1711) trans. unknown, qtd. in Krahn, "Some Cultural Contributions" 93.

## II. The Russian School Debate

After settling in Russia in 1789 at the invitation of Catherine the Great, the Mennonites in Russia pursued a policy of segregation for the first one hundred years; however, rapid industrialization near the end of the nineteenth century resulted in Mennonites getting actively involved in aspects outside of their immediate community. Prosperity brought opportunities for employment other than farming as well as an interest in higher education. By the 1920s every Mennonite colony maintained a Zentralschule and a high school, and some young men studied theology at German or Russian universities. Improved education gave Mennonites access to High German literature from beyond the Mennonite tradition.[41]

During this period two streams of Mennonite culture can be identified, a Low German oral culture and the emergence of a High German literary culture.[42] The oral culture of home and farm provided an outlet for storytelling, riddles, and wordplay. Other community-centred activities such as circle games, skits, and mumming rounded out this everyday culture.[43] On the other hand, a greater appreciation of European art forms led to the development of choral singing and the establishment of literary societies. We see during this period a move away from outright prohibition of the arts towards a tentative consideration of mainstream art forms, characterized by a cultural approach that appropriated elements from the mainstream even if it did not contribute to it. It should be noted that Mennonite appreciation of the arts was largely limited to the didactic. According to Al Reimer, Mennonite fiction inclined towards the "rigidly didactic" or alternatively to the "exotic or romantically remote." Realistic fiction, as well as mimetic art such as painting, remained largely foreign to the Mennonite experience.[44]

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[41] Urry, "From Speech to Literature: Low German and Mennonite Identity in Two Worlds," *History and Anthropology* 5.2 (1991): 237.

[42] Urry, "From Speech to Literature" 233-58.

[43] My research uncovered scant evidence for these particular cultural activities. I rely primarily on James Urry's findings as reported in "From Speech to Literature" and "Private Lives and Public Images: Mennonite Popular Culture in Historical Perspective," *Mennonite Mirror* Apr. 1990: 9-12. An article in *Der Botschafter* talks about the tradition of family skits put on the evening before the wedding (10 Sept. 1910: 3).

Discussions of theatre centred on Mennonite high schools in Russia where pupils performed plays from the 1890s onward.[45] These performances were not written by Mennonites dealing with Mennonite topics, but rather dramatic works written by German or Russian authors. The teachers and ministers connected with these schools were active supporters of drama, but conservative leaders adopted a more cautious position. The controversy came to a head in 1910/11. Church papers of the time provide a telling commentary of the debate.

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Some oral and written accounts of community activities in Canada suggest that these activities had their origin in Russia. Peter Lorenz Neufeld reports that "Schlusselbund" or circle games were popular entertainment among the *Russlaender* immigrants. A combination of square-dancing and German folk-singing, these games were practiced by young people at weddings or Sunday evening socials. "Mennonite Folksongs and Group Games Once Fuelled Mennonite Social Activity," *Mennonite Mirror* July-Aug. 1989: 5-6.

A striking photograph on display at the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Steinbach, Manitoba shows a group of masked Mennonites in mumming costume. Author Armin Wiebe recounts the *Brummtopp* (or mumming) tradition in an interview with Margaret Loewen Reimer. "Armin Wiebe Returns to Gutenthal," *Mennonite Reporter* 13 Jan. 1992: 12.

[44] Al Reimer, "The Russian-Mennonite Experience in Fiction," *Mennonite Images*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980) 222.

[45] James Urry, e-mail to Margaret Van Dyke, 30 Nov. 1994. I am indebted to Dr. Urry for directing me to source materials about the debate over theatre in Russian Mennonite schools.

An anonymous defender of the theatre, identifying himself only as *Ein Mensch*, writes in *Der Botschafter*,

> What is the purpose of a theatre production? The same as of a book . . . to edify us. That is why we are so often told to read only good books. . . . Books may try to get us to laugh, but only cautiously. In holy earnestness they should whisper in the readers' ear: 'See the wretchedness man foolishly gets himself into--beware, steer clear!'[46]

Other proponents of theatre used similar classic arguments. One admonishes teachers to concentrate on "the truly edifying, that which encourages the good" and to "care only for the spiritual education of our youth."[47] It is not surprising that a moral educational justification for the theatre prefers tragedies over comedies. "Every good play gives us a glimpse into a higher, divine world-order. . . . A good tragedy in particular can touch our innermost soul," says another author and continues, "should we not welcome whatever can arouse the sense of beauty, truth and nobility in the heart?" As an example he cites Schiller's plays as "morally edifying in the noblest sense."[48]

An interesting critique of the theatre by Professor F. Bettex appeared in the

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[46] "Theater," *Der Botschafter* 11 June 1910: 3. English translation of all references to articles in *Der Botschafter* and *Friedensstimme* were prepared by Harry Van Dyke.

[47] P. Riediger, "Theater und Literaturabende [Theatre and Literature Evenings]," *Der Botschafter* 15 June 1910: 3. The ads in this issue are interesting. One features complete installations of electric light and transformers for mills, factories, and homes. Another recommends passage by steamer from Bremen to America, Asia, and South Africa--Transvaal. The columns on the side list bond prices and market prices of grain. It would seem that Russian Mennonites embraced technological innovations but showed restraint regarding cultural and artistic enterprises.

[48] G. Lowen, "Einiges uber Kunst, Literatur, Theater und Literaturabende [Some Notes on Art, Literature, Theatre and Literature Evenings]," *Friedensstimme* 3 July 1910: 4-6.

*Friedensstimme* in three installments.[49] Bettex delivers a fairly thorough historical overview of drama, but gives only the Greeks, Shakespeare, and Schiller a positive evaluation. He rejects in no uncertain terms the "unwholesome" drama of Bjorn[son] and Ibsen, the "raw naturalism" of Zola, and the "sensation pieces" and "shallow operettas" of popular entertainment. He criticizes Racine and Moliere for drawing "their characters too much from abroad" and faults Hauptmann and Sudermann's work for lacking in "lofty themes as well as the grand design."

Mennonites defended theatre attendance on grounds of moral and intellectual improvement. They preferred to see dramas depicting ideal truths and the nobler aspects of humanity. Nevertheless, there seems to be considerable discomfort with presenting religious subject matter directly on stage. There is a sense that a dramatic interpretation of religious feeling somehow cheapens it. Furthermore, any representation of the divine itself is objectionable. Bettex comments, "the deepest reason for the Christian's low estimate of drama is this: for him who knows of other, higher, eternal ideals, everything earthly and perishable turns pale and even the highest human art becomes mere play."[50] Riediger, who supports drama in the schools, warns, "let us be on our guard against so-called religious plays, as these have been put on from time to time. Every true Christian must feel hurt to see sacred history profaned in this way."[51] Even Heinrich Epp, in an otherwise favourable review of the Passion Play at Oberammergau, nevertheless concludes that "religion, the highest and the divine, does not belong on the stage."[52] These remarks indicate that the Mennonite mind could not conceive of a mimetic representation of spiritual reality; hence, the religious realm of Mennonite experience remained closed to dramatic contemplation. Not until recently have issues of faith and spirituality received serious dramatic treatment by contemporary Mennonite playwrights.

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[49] "Theater und Theaterbesuch [Theatre and Theatre Attendance]," *Friedensstimme* 11 Sept. 1910: 5-7; 18 Sept.: 3-4; 25 Sept.: 5-7.

[50] Bettex, "Theater und Theaterbesuch," 25 Sept. 1910: 6.

[51] Riediger, "Theater und Literaturabende" 3.

From the foregoing it is clear that Russian Mennonites relied on a conservative apologetic for art, emphasizing decorum and a beautiful expression of the universal human condition. This idealistic evaluation of drama praised the tragedies of Shakespeare and Schiller but despised the contemporary social critique of the realists. From a present-day standpoint, a curious feature of the debate is its reliance on conventional argument and aesthetics. Despite a moral evaluation of drama, none of the authors define morality in a characteristic Anabaptist way. Principles of pacifism, humility, or community ethic are not even discussed with reference to art, so that even Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* and *The Girl of Orleans*, plays about revolution and war, are recommended as suitable material for Mennonite young people. A notable lack in the debate is reference to Dutch dramatists or apologists. Any references to outside critics are German, confirming Mennonite affinity with German culture and language. Attempts at a distinctly Mennonite evaluation of art and literature was not made until much later in North America. As we shall see, Russian-Mennonite immigrants in Canada attempted to cultivate an artistic expression of Mennonite experience while resisting a mainstream definition of art.

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[52] "Das Passionsspiel in Oberammergau [The Passion Play at Oberammergau]," *Der Botschafter* 14 Sept. 1910: 2.

### III. Art Appreciation in Canada

The "veritable chorus" of Canadian Mennonite writing that Al Reimer observed in 1993[53] seems to have come out of nowhere; however, significant artistic developments in Mennonite society throughout this century had prepared the ground for the later literary explosion. A brief discussion of these developments will demonstrate that Mennonite society was not nearly as artistically deprived as is sometimes assumed. It will also demonstrate how church-sponsored activities for the youth laid the groundwork for the successful Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre.

Among the cultural resources Russian Mennonites brought to Canada was the institution of literary societies. Also operating in Mennonite churches and Bible colleges in the United States, literary societies flourished in Canadian Mennonite congregations during the inter-war years. Their chief purpose was character development of its members — mentally, morally, spiritually, and physically — through recreational activities including debates, music, sports, poetry reading, and dramatic presentations. Since Mennonites were discouraged from participating in Canadian cultural activities, literary societies provided alternative recreational and cultural opportunities by exploring "worldly" culture within the safe confines of the Mennonite community.[54] Another youth movement of the time, the *Jugendverein*, whose purpose was similar to that of literary societies but operated directly under church leadership, also introduced its members to speech arts, literary readings, and dramatizations. The *Jugendverein* provided freedom for innovation and experimentation, as congregational members of all ages enjoyed music festivals and talent nights sponsored by their local *Jugendverein*.[55]

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[53] *Mennonite Literary Voices* 1.

[54] Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982) 455-59. Cornelius Krahn, "Literary Societies," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* III: 353.

Choral singing marks the height of Mennonite cultural achievement. Much has been written about the Mennonite choral tradition,[56] but for the purpose of this thesis, it is sufficient to say that the development of Mennonite choirs nourished lay participation in the arts and fostered standards of artistic excellence in musical performance. Through choral singing, Mennonites tapped into the German "kunst musica" of Bach, Mendelssohn, and Schubert. Performances of large-scale oratorios familiarized Mennonites with theatrical spectacle.

As well, in the sheltered world of Canadian Mennonite society, there emerged a small but distinctive body of Mennonite literature.[57] The thematic focus of this literature centred on the Russian Mennonite experience, the loss of homeland, destruction of the Mennonite commonwealth, and personal suffering. Unlike the pious devotional material Mennonites produced in Russia, the authors of this new movement employed realist techniques, producing concrete imaginative writing in a variety of genres including memoirs, poems, novels, and short dramatic sketches. Written in High German, occasionally interspersed with Low German dialogue, Russian Mennonite emigre literature was meant for

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[55] Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 459-561.

[56] See Wesley Berg, *From Russia With Music: Mennonite Choral Singing Tradition in Canada* (Winnipeg: Hyperion, 1985).

[57] The most significant of these writers were J. H. Janzen, Gerhard Loewen, Johann P. Klassen, Peter J. Klassen, Fritz Senn, Gerhard G. Toews, and Arnold Dyck. For this paragraph I relied on the following sources: Georg K. Epp, "Der mennonitische Beitrag zur deutschkanadischen Literatur [Mennonite Contributions to German Canadian Literature]," *German-Canadian Yearbook 1981* (Toronto: UP, 1981) 140-48; J. H. Janzen, "The Literature of the Russo-Canadian Mennonites" 22-5, 28; Cornelius Krahn, "Literature, Mennonites in: VI. Russia and Russo-German Emigres," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* III: 369-371; Al Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices*, Chapter 1; Al Reimer, "The Russian-Mennonite Experience in Fiction" 221-35.

Mennonite consumption. Unfortunately, realist fiction gained little acceptance in the increasingly evangelical-minded Mennonite community, although a few Low German sketches did gain some popularity.[58] As a result, Russian emigre writers found themselves writing on the fringe of Mennonite community life.

After the Second World War, technological changes and urbanization caused tremendous changes for Mennonite society. Mass communication media of radio, motion pictures, and television disrupted Mennonite isolation.[59] The modern age demanded higher education and Mennonites responded by establishing high schools and colleges. Well-educated Mennonites entered urban professions such as secretarial, nursing, and social work, with the result that by 1960 the majority of Mennonites were no longer farmers.[60] In the modern world, Mennonite separateness, and with it a distinct Mennonite identity, was rapidly eroding.

The assimilation process and its accompanying tensions asserted itself in the realm of language and communication. In the past, High and Low German languages ensured Mennonite religious and cultural distinctiveness, while Russian or English served to maintain obligatory contact with outsiders. In post-war Canada, however, English had replaced German as the primary language of home and church, solidifying a long process of Mennonite identification with mainstream Canadian concerns and values. That Mennonite assimilation into the English mainstream was far from complete is illustrated by Victor Doerksen's description of Mennonite worship services as "grotesque, often humorous" combinations of "archaic" theological terminology and "the jargon of the social sciences." Doerksen observed that the Mennonite language scene of the 1960s was "one of disarray, awaiting integration."[61]

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[58] Arnold Dyck's "Koop enn Bua" stories were reprinted repeatedly. His Low German plays such as *Dee Fria, Wellkaom op'e Forstei*, and *De Opnaom* have been presented in many Mennonite communities and schools in Canada and the U.S. J. H. Janzen's Low German one-act *De Bildung* [Education, 1912] was first performed at a Mennonite high school in Russia and later restaged in Canada. Krahn, "VI. Russia and Russo-German Emigres" 370-71. Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices* 13-17. Urry, "From Speech to Literature" 246.

[59] Gering 57-69.

[60] Andreas Schroeder, *The Mennonites: A Pictorial History of their Lives in Canada* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990) 98.

Typically, a hallmark of an ethnic group is its language. In the case of the Mennonites, Low German holds a privileged place as a consistent marker of Mennonite identity. As Reuben Epp and others have shown,[62] Low German preserved a distinct Mennonite identity in half a dozen homelands throughout four-hundred-and-fifty years of history. Others, such as author Rudy Wiebe and sociologist Calvin Redekop, prefer to locate the Mennonite identity in religion rather than language.[63] These two different aspects of Mennonite identity are not mutually exclusive — as a matter of fact, some Mennonites fear that the disappearance of the German language results in the breakdown of religious commitment — but the distinction is helpful in understanding diverse experiences of Mennonite identity and how these experiences expressed themselves in the work of recent Mennonite writers. Issues of language and identity received artistic expression in Rudy Wiebe's first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962). In a similar vein, the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre explored generational and communication conflicts in its 1972 production of *Und Keiner Hoert Hin*, a bilingual play written and performed in English and German.[64]

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[61] "Language and Communication Among Urban Mennonites," *Mennonites in Urban Canada*, ed. Leo Driedger (Winnipeg: U of Manitoba, 1968) 182-85.

[62] See Reuben Epp, *The Story of Low German*; James Urry, "From Speech to Literature" 233-58; Al Reimer, Anne Reimer, Jack Thiessen, eds., *A Sackful of Plautdietsch* (Winnipeg: Hyperion, 1983).

[63] Rudy Wiebe writes, "[I believe] the essence of the Mennonite group is not tied so much to language, although language is often convenient for separation from other groups, but rather to the ideas that they hold. For me, the ideas, concepts and religious outlook are more important than the language of my people." "Panel Discussion: 'Ethnicity and Identity: The Question of One's Literary Passport,'" *Identifications: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada*, ed. Jars Balan (Edmonton: The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, U of Alberta, 1982) 68-9.

Calvin Redekop argues, "the Anabaptist-Mennonite phenomenon is and was a religiously motivated utopian movement . . . constantly faced with 'ethnicizing' tendencies, but never accepted, or capitulated to, becoming a sociological ethnic group because of the religious ideology which was at the heart of its origin." "The Sociology of Mennonite Identity," *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Calvin Wall Redekop, asst. ed. Samuel J. Steiner (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988) 173.

The disappearance of the German language in Canadian Mennonite society required a fresh articulation of a Mennonite identity not based on linguistic difference. Sociologist Donald B. Kraybill suggests that "ideational" rather than linguistic separation provides Mennonites with a new sense of peoplehood. According to Kraybill, this new identity based on values and beliefs waives communal conformity in favour of membership by individual choice.

> One might argue that this is a happy day for Anabaptists who have heralded voluntarism, since the modern situation forces individuals to "choose their heritage." In any event, the subjective identity shifts from a communal one to an individualistic one. Instead of the group automatically enveloping the individual, now individuals "choose their own history." The collective language of "we" and "our" is supplanted with "I decided" and "I prefer." "What the Mennonite affiliation can do for me," replaces humility and submission to group prerogatives. For example,

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[64] Gert Neuendorf, *Und Keiner Hoert Hin: Ein zweisprachiges Schauspiel/And Nobody Listens: A Bilingual Play* (Toronto: German-Canadian Historical Association, 1982). Produced by the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre, Playhouse Theatre, 1972.

> we hear, "Everyone needs roots so I decided to stick with mine," and, "I'm a Mennonite because I like acapella singing or the tradition of service."[65]

It sounds as if Kraybill anticipates a post-modern understanding of identity where, in the absence of social homogeneity, individuals can adopt an ethnic identity to varying degrees as they so choose.

Individuation also affects the place of art in an ethnic community. According to Kraybill, abstract expressions of ethnicity are attractive because Mennonites can pick and choose which art works best sum up their experience of being Mennonite.[66] Al Reimer laments the fact that current interest in "Mennonite" art is often "pretentious, undiscriminating, or shamelessly nostalgic."[67] Folklorist Magnus Einarsson notes that the sentimental aspect of ethnic art gives people a sense of continuity with the past.

> Long, long after the inevitable has happened, after language is lost and culture irredeemably changed, folk art is a storehouse of motifs and imagery. It is a storehouse from which individuals can select identity symbols to anchor and ally themselves to a cultural heritage to which they otherwise have no real or meaningful access.[68]

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[65] "Modernity and Identity: The Transformation of Mennonite Ethnicity," *Mennonite Identity*, ed. Calvin Wall Redekop, asst. ed. Samuel J. Steiner, 168.

[66] Kraybill 166. As tangible markers, such as plain dress for example, cease to define what it means to be Mennonite, literary texts, whether English, Low German, or German, often serve to crystalize a Mennonite identity. An interesting example is the *Mennonite Mirror*. As the title indicates, this magazine strove to mirror contemporary Mennonite culture; however, only highly selective aspects of that culture were included in the magazine. The *Mennonite Mirror* not so much mirrored as constructed an identity of urban, literary, highly-educated mennonitism.

[67] "Coming in Out of the Cold," *Why I am a Mennonite*, ed. Harry Loewen (Kitchener: Herald, 1988) 263-64.

[68] Curatorial Note, *Just for Nice: German-Canadian Folk Art*, ed. Magnus Einarsson and Helga Benndorf Taylor (Hull, PQ: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1993) 10.

Mennonite artists today decide for themselves whether they have real or meaningful access to their heritage. Their position as individuals in relation to their heritage is uniquely their own, which merely proves Kraybill's thesis that Mennonites do indeed have a choice to engage with their tradition or not. What is of interest for the purpose of this thesis is the question as to which literary "motifs and imagery," to use Einarsson's phrase, Mennonite artists use for the construction of their personal ethnic/religious Mennonite identity. As we shall see, the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre returned to its European cultural heritage in shaping a Mennonite identity, while contemporary playwrights who followed later construct an identity rooted in historical events.

## IV. The Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre

For centuries Amsterdam was the largest Mennonite urban centre in the world, but that auspicious title has now passed to Winnipeg, Manitoba. In 1990 almost 20,000 Mennonites lived in Winnipeg, the faithful worshipping in 47 churches around the city. Almost all of North America's Mennonite newspapers are located in Winnipeg, as are two Bible Colleges, two high schools and one elementary school. With the city accommodating a large concentration of *Russlaender* Mennonites,[69] it is not surprising that the first independent Mennonite theatre organization should appear in this centre of Mennonite cultural activity.[70]

Founded in 1972, the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre had its origins in the activities of the *Jugendverein* of First Mennonite Church (General Conference) in Winnipeg. From 1946-66, the *Jugendverein* annually presented plays by German playwrights such as Schiller and Lessing and non-German playwrights in translation, such as American authors Miller and Wilder and the Russian Gogol. The church group's desire to establish an independent, quasi-professional theatre led to the founding of the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre (WMT), whose mandate was to produce theatre specifically for the Mennonite community. Predictably, a cursory glance at the theatre's repertoire reveals how ambivalent the meaning of "Mennonite" really is, since no tradition of Mennonite theatre existed and the "Mennonite" label meant different things to different people.

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[69] Mennonites immigrating from Russia in the 1920s are commonly known as *Russlaender* to distinguish them from the 1874 Mennonite immigrant group known as the *Kanadier*. The *Russlaender* are a culturally more sophisticated branch of the Russian Mennonite family.

[70] Leo Driedger, *Mennonites in Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1990).

During its twenty years of operation, the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre produced primarily German-language plays and operas supplemented by a few English-language pieces and original works by Mennonite playwrights.[71] German operas such as Mozart's *Die Zauberfloete* (1982) and Strauss' *Der Zigeunerbaron* (1979) proved to be the most successful and financially profitable. German-language plays drew a loyal, albeit steadily decreasing, German-speaking audience. Curiously, the *Mennonite Mirror*, a cultural magazine aimed at urban Mennonites, located the theatre's "ethnic emphasis" in these "German play[s] and classics performed in translation."[72] In a similar vein, one of the theatre's past artistic directors, Alfred Wiebe, remarked that the "Germanic orientation" is "an integral part of the WMT's constitution."[73] It would seem that plays from any cultural background, whether in German, Russian, French, or American, could fit the Mennonite

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[71] For a selected list of WMT productions see Appendix C.

[72] Veralyn Warkentin, "A Stage in the Community: WMT Since 1972," *Mennonite Mirror* Nov. 1990: 6.

[73] Warkentin 6.

"bill", so long as they were performed in the German language. Unfortunately, WMT advanced a German ethnic identity during a time when the German language was suffering a rapid decline in the Mennonite community.

Even more curious is the role of multi-cultural institutions. WMT received funding from the Manitoba Ethnic Cultural Society. In 1981, WMT's production of Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* represented Manitoba in the National Multicultural Theatre Association Festival in Prince Edward Island. Considering Mennonite accomplishment in music and WMT's financial success with other operas, WMT's *Gianni* can assumed to have been of superior quality; however, production values aside, the choice of staging an Italian opera does call into question WMT's ethnic allegiance.

Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre's reliance on European and American classics highlights the fragmentation of the Mennonite ethnic identity. The WMT seems to have had difficulty integrating aspects of low culture into the repertoire of the theatre; oral storytelling, bawdy humour, and use of Low German were almost absent. Rather, the WMT was a sophisticated theatre in that it staged artistic works of multiple cultures. Patrons of the WMT looked for identity markers in something other than peculiar lifestyle and dress, finding their distinctiveness in the German language and in the literary accomplishments of Europe.

It is not my purpose here to malign the WMT achievements or its influence on its community. WMT produced a number of interesting plays dealing with specific Mennonite topics. Susan Hiebert's *Trudje* (1977) dealt with the conflict between Mennonites and the Manitoba School Act of 1919 which prohibited the teaching of German. This topical play of the dilemma of bilingualism represented Manitoba in the National

Multicultural Theatre Association Festival in Vancouver. I have already mentioned Gert Neuendorf's *Und Keiner Hoert Hin*, also a play about bilingualism. *Wer Nimmt Uns Auf* [Who Takes Us In, 1976] and *Die Emigranten* (1985) dealt with Mennonite emigration and refugee history. *Sanctuary* (1989) by Esther Wiens depicts the struggle of a Californian Mennonite family who follow their conscience and illegally harbour refugees from El Salvador. Veralyn Warkentin's own *Family Rebellion* (1993), one of the last plays staged by WMT, is a farcical look at growing up in small-town Mennonite society. The play pokes fun at the German language but was performed in English.

WMT exposed a musically accomplished but artistically skeptical community to the art of theatre. Its effect is unmeasurable. Perhaps its declining audience testified to a job well done: the younger generation was attending mainstream theatre, and budding playwrights were already practicing their craft outside the safe confines of the Mennonite community. The success of *The Shunning* (1985) at Prairie Theatre Exchange indicates to a certain degree that mainstream Canadian theatre dares to tackle Mennonite subject matter. Contemporary Mennonite playwrights do not write in German anymore; their plays find a stage in English-language venues. Decreasing emphasis on the German language as a Mennonite indicator no doubt led to the theatre's demise in the early nineties.

## V. Mainstreaming Mennonite Theatre

If Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* can be said to be the first Canadian-Mennonite novel, then Patrick Friesen's *The Shunning* is the first Canadian-Mennonite drama. Produced at the Prairie Theatre Exchange in 1985, *The Shunning* presented a fundamentally Mennonite conflict — that of the church shunning one of its members —

in a mainstream Canadian theatre. As I have indicated, plays by and about Mennonites were produced before Friesen's drama, but not at mainstream English-Canadian venues. *The Shunning* played successfully to Mennonite and non-Mennonite audiences alike and has been produced nation-wide.[74] Like Wiebe's novel, *The Shunning*'s success can be regarded as much a Canadian as a Mennonite phenomenon.[75]

In fact, the emergence of contemporary Mennonite playwrights should be viewed within the broader context of Canadian theatre. The Canadian theatre scene, with its network of professional workshops, theatre festivals, and post-secondary education encourages the development of new playwrights. Veralyn Warkentin and Vern Thiessen, specifically, were shaped as much by the wider theatrical milieu of English Canada as by their involvement with church drama and the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre, and they are not alone in their familiarity with the Canadian cultural establishment. This contemporary situation has some interesting parallels with seventeenth-century Holland, since like their Dutch ancestors, Russian Mennonites in Canada have enjoyed religious freedom, prosperity, and a high level of education. Mennonite migration to urban centres opened up avenues for cultural participation and their adoption of the English language helped them identify with a Canadian national consciousness. As a result, Warkentin and

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[74] Productions include, among others: Theatre and Company, Kitchener, ON, 1992; Fraser Valley Arts and Peace Festival, August 1993; Redeemer College, Ancaster, ON, April 1997. In the Fall of 1996, the "Motus O" dance company in Toronto adapted *The Shunning* as a dance performance.

[75] Peter Erb observes that "the sudden arrival of the novelist Wiebe in Canadian letters is better understood within and is more reflective of the context of the Canadian novel's sudden bursting into life in the 1960s. In this view Wiebe reflects Canadian literary culture primarily and only in a secondary fashion can he be used as a document for the study of Mennonite culture in Canada." Peter C. Erb, "Critical Approaches to Mennonite Culture In Canada: Some Preliminary Observations." *Visions and Realities* 210.

Hildi Froese Tiessen credits Canada's multi-cultural policy and aid-to-publications program with the rise of Canadian-Mennonite literature and visual art. Tiessen, "The Role of Art and Literature in Mennonite Self-Understanding" 239.

Thiessen and other younger Mennonite writers define themselves as Canadian rather than German or Mennonite.[76]

Because artistic expression has traditionally been suspect in the Mennonite community, playwrights remain at the fringe of Mennonite culture. Even so, a Mennonite influence can be discerned in Warkentin's and Thiessen's dramatic choices. Especially their early work gives voice to Mennonite issues and concerns, which supports the argument that writers must articulate a personal response to their heritage before they are free to move on. Even in dealing with topics not specifically Mennonite, both playwrights employ similar techniques to challenge an identity based on suffering and separation as they: explore the dynamic relationship between the individual and the collective; examine community as both a nurturing and an isolating force; experiment with dramatic expressions of faith and religious feelings; and seek self-understanding through a critical evaluation of their heritage.

I will focus my discussion on works dealing specifically with Mennonite subject matter, or at least with traditional Mennonite concerns, since these works illustrate most clearly the idea of art as a powerful shaping force of communal myth and memory. The Mennonite community provides Warkentin and Thiessen with a unique repertoire of religious experience extending over four hundred years. Of particular interest to my discussion is the Mennonite sensitivity to biblical rhetoric and myth and to the practice of communal storytelling. As Warkentin and Thiessen draw on their Mennonite heritage in composing their works, they are able to make use of elements taken from the wider surrounding culture of which they are also members. Negotiating between their Canadian and Mennonite identity, they shape and are shaped by the values of these respective communities.

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[76] Veralyn Warkentin, telephone interview, 11 May 1996. Vern Thiessen, personal interview, 16 Nov. 1994. Ironically, by defining themselves as Canadian rather than Mennonite, Warkentin and Thiessen may well have substituted one ambiguous identity for an even more elusive one.

# CHAPTER 2

# VERALYN WARKENTIN: A VOICE FOR WOMEN

## I. Introduction: Warkentin's Place

Veralyn Warkentin's entire writing career can be seen as a mediation between practical community service and artistic freedom. Warkentin is a versatile writer whose fiction, poetry and articles have appeared in *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Zygote*, *Absinthe*, and the *Mennonite Mirror*; but it is primarily through her dramatic writing that Warkentin explores issues of personal identity and belonging. In fact, Warkentin's commitment to community service prompted her graduate examining committee to ask, "Why do you not rail against your tradition like all those other Mennonite writers?"[77] In questioning Warkentin's favourable assessment of Mennonite society, the examining committee uncovered the cornerstone of Warkentin's artistic approach. While more positive in her approach to art and culture and in her recognition of the importance of the body than her Anabaptist forebears, Warkentin takes her position inside, rather than outside, the Mennonite faith. Her path is to redeem those elements of her ethnic religious heritage that validate her identity as an artist and as a woman.

Warkentin writes with the ethnic community clearly in mind, dramatizing communal history with an eye to instruction and reconciliation. *Chastity Belts* (1992)[78] and *Mary*

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[77] Veralyn Warkentin, personal interview, 17 Nov. 1994. The examining committee asked this question during Warkentin's oral defence for a Master of Arts degree at the University of Manitoba in Spring 1994. I believe the committee rightly observed Warkentin's sympathetic engagement with her Mennonite heritage, unlike the high-profile militancy of Di Brandt and Audrey Poetker, but similar to the approach of poets Sarah Klassen and Jean Jantzen. See Al Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices* 42-50.

[78] A production history of *Chastity Belts* and of other plays discussed in this chapter appears in Appendix A.

*and Martha* (1994), the plays central to my study, are typical of plays that dramatize communal history, as are *Family Rebellion* (1993) and *Like the Sun* (1995). *Like the Sun* recreates the well-known struggles of Irish immigrants and sets up a dramatic action that shifts between the present — a Canadian school girl writing an essay about the Irish famine and presenting it to her grandmother — and the past — Irish peasants emigrating to Canada. The juxtaposition of the Irish peasants and their present-day descendants is clearly intended to instruct the younger generation about their heritage and to integrate in a meaningful way a history of suffering with a secure present. As the characters in the "Irish" story come to a point of forgiving the English and embracing their new homeland, the audience is encouraged to be at peace with their past and live for the future. *Like the Sun* was warmly received by Irish communities in Canada, the U.S., and Ireland.

*Family Rebellion*, a comedy about growing up Mennonite in a small Manitoba town, was a hit at the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre where it won the WMT's twentieth anniversary playwriting contest. It presents the adventures of a precocious young woman who desperately tries to escape her low-brow Mennonite upbringing by traveling to "cultured" England. However, she soon discovers that the grass is not always greener on the other side and returns home with a new appreciation for her Mennonite family. Essentially a stand-up-comedy routine in which one actress performs "herself" and imitates an assortment of eccentric family members, the play was written to poke gentle fun at stereotypes and idiosyncrasies associated with being Mennonite.

The specific themes of forgiveness and reconciliation in Warkentin's earlier plays have remained central in her later plays. In *Like the Sun*, Warkentin dramatizes the need to forgive and to be forgiven, a theme she explored in a Mennonite context in her earlier play *Mary and Martha*.[79] Both plays present the writer as the link between past and present, although the writer in *Mary and Martha* is problematic, as I shall demonstrate in my analysis. The subject presented in a farcical manner in *Family Rebellion* received a more serious treatment in Warkentin's earlier one-woman play, *Chastity Belts*. Here, another intelligent young woman with an acute sense of humour — this time a fourteenth-century religious leader — takes the audience along a journey of self-discovery. In contrast to the protagonist's happy homecoming in *Family Rebellion*, *Chastity Belts* ends in an ambiguous truce between the protagonist and the institutional church.

Warkentin's fundamental commitment to reconciliation is clearly evident in her attempt to integrate the Christian faith with her feminist convictions. In both *Chastity Belts* and *Mary and Martha*, Warkentin affirms the religious impetus that in large measure defines Mennonite identity and at the same time examines gender identity within that religious framework. In these plays, Warkentin breaks new ground by dramatizing women's religious experience in a religious tradition that shuns drama. She creates a public space for women in a tradition that relegates women to the private sphere of home and children. As well, Warkentin stages the female body for a public that perceives women as neutered persons.[80] In recent years, women's experiences have received literary attention in the Mennonite community.[81] Literature professor Hildi Froese Tiessen points out that voices of Mennonite women writers are "often projections of the author's foremothers who suffered an enforced silence throughout the official history of their people."[82] So far, Warkentin has not published writing about her own female ancestors;[83] rather, her plays celebrate historical instances when women successfully unite diverse aspects of their spiritual and gender identities.

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[79] *Like the Sun* replaced the Mennonite theme with the Irish theme, and although it enjoyed the most mainstream support, I find it a less compelling drama than Warkentin's plays dealing with overtly Mennonite topics.

[80] Katie Funk Wiebe defines the predominant female archetype in Russian Mennonite literature as "Eve before the Fall, a pure and a-sexual preserver of Mennonite faith and culture . . . rarely beautiful in face or figure . . . seen from a practical perspective, an unemotional, stolid domestic beast of burden who marries, bears children, works hard, and goes to her grave, unrewarded and unnoticed." "The Mennonite Woman in Mennonite Fiction," *Visions and Realities* 231-2.

In advancing a position that enables women to be Mennonite and complete persons at the same time, Warkentin must confront the religious conflict of living in the "secular" corporal world and preparing for the "spiritual" immaterial hereafter. In her plays, she exposes religious practices that divorce spirituality from practical service as especially damaging for women whose subordinate position in social life already limits their religious participation, just as it is similarly crippling for artists whose physical representations of religious experience are denied their spiritual relevancy. Before examining Warkentin's plays in depth, I will look at how the Mennonite faith, despite its initial rejection of religious hierarchies, maintained and reinforced the unequal split between body and soul, that has made itself felt in gender definition as well.

## II. Mennonites: Heirs to Western Dualism

The dichotomy between body and spirit in Western civilization is well-known. In the Christian tradition, the Mary and Martha story, which appears in the Gospel of Luke, illustrates the sharp dividing line between Christian service that attends to physical needs and one which meditates on Christ's word and presence:

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[81] For a detailed list of Mennonite women writers and critics see Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices* 37.

[82] Introduction, *Mennonite/s Writing in Canada* 12.

[83] Warkentin is presently working on a collection of stories about the emigration experience of her grandmother. Telephone interview, 11 May 1996.

> Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, "Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me." And Jesus answered and said unto her, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42, KJV)

Cast in the form of a parable, in which two sisters are pitted against each other, the Mary and Martha story is a powerful trope in Christian literature that elevates the life of the mind over the life of the hands. Traditional commentaries interpret the two siblings as representing two ways of serving Christ that are mutually exclusive.[84] Martha represents the practical life which, although Christ-directed, is too bound up in the concerns of this world to be spiritually fruitful. Mary represents a life of quiet contemplation where, removed from the confusion of this world, a person may listen to the voice of God and enter into the divine presence. This dialectic reading of the Mary and Martha story aligns quiet contemplation with the transcendent, and pragmatic concerns with profane existence.

A hierarchical view of physical and spiritual reality carries profound repercussions for a Christian participation in art and culture.[85] In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church approached culture cooptively by bringing cultural elements under its domain in the service of salvation.[86] During the same time, monastic living advocated a retreatist approach by denying the cares of this world in order to fully partake of the love of God. This prohibitive view of culture, which considered a life of complete seclusion the pinnacle of Christian perfection, robbed lay believers of a religiously sanctioned outlet in which to achieve full communion with God in the secular domain.[87] Although I am oversimplifying, it may be said that the medieval world-view affirmed the religious significance of art while drawing a sharp contrast between people's spiritual and mundane needs.

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[84] References to dualistic interpretations are scattered throughout commentary sources. See, for example, cited works by Caird 149, Barnes 71, Drury 123, Morris 210, Ellis 162.

In response to the specialization of Christian service which depreciated the daily life of the common people, leaders of the Reformation attempted to restore lay participation and leadership. They began by contesting the privileged position of worship aids such as representational images, the church calendar, or sacramental elements.[88] No place, person, time, or substance was deemed intrinsically more sacred than another. Second, vernacular scriptures made accessible through the recent invention of the printing press[89] affirmed the spiritual relevance of common language and culture. The result was that new communities of lay believers were empowered to read and interpret the Bible for themselves and hence to challenge authorized doctrines and practices.[90] Furthermore, a rejection of the vow of chastity as a requirement to Christian perfection encouraged an appreciation of human sexuality in relation to the divine.[91] Under the banner of the priesthood of all believers, Anabaptism, as well as other Reformation movements, attempted to place holy living and communion with God within reach of lay believers; however, this new opportunity for living an integral Christian life never enjoyed a complete triumph.[92]

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[85] See John Ruth, *Mennonite Identity and Literary Art* 30, where Ruth cites examples from biblical, patristic, and medieval times to demonstrate that the conflict between art and spirituality "inheres in the basic dialectic of Western culture."

[86] M. C. Smit, "The Character of the Middle Ages," (1958) *Writings on God and History*, by M. C. Smit, ed. Harry Van Dyke, trans. Herbert Donald Morton (Jordan Station, ON: Wedge, 1987) 108.

[87] Medievalist Michael Seidlmayer observes that "the Middle Ages were not able to work out . . . a Christian lay ethic, an ethic that is erected upon the unreserved appreciation for life in the world with its task and values." "Religios-ethische Probleme des italienischen Humanismus," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 39 (1958): 108, qtd. in M. C. Smit, "Culture and Salvation," (1959) *Writings on God and History* 130.

[88] Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, rev. ed. (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1981) 10-17.

A rebellious religious spirit combined with external circumstances encouraged Mennonites to adopt a position of cultural isolation. Driven by persecution to Europe's isolated areas, Mennonites developed into a self-sufficient community with "no use" for the world. C. Henry Smith suggests that persecution intensified the Mennonites' sense of "other-worldliness."[93] Escaping hardship in the Lowlands and Prussia, Mennonites finally settled in Russia's frontier where administrative autonomy over all aspects of village life assured their separateness. Later immigration to Canada heightened suspicion of outsiders resulting in limited contact with "the English," a term defining anyone who came from a non-Mennonite background.[94] Mennonites solved a spiritually strained relationship to the world on a community level. Not unlike the medieval ascetic who sacrificed personal engagement with the world in order to focus on the love of God, the entire Mennonite community segregated itself from the world in order to better serve God in accordance with the Scriptures as they understood it. Through communal segregation, the corporate body of Christ, namely Mennonite society, safeguarded the salvation interests of its individual members.[95]

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[89] C. Henry Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, 4th ed., rev. Cornelius Krahn (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office, 1957) 18.

[90] Kenneth R. Davis, "The Origins of Anabaptism: Ascetic and Charismatic Elements Exemplifying Continuity and Discontinuity," *The Origins and Characteristics of Anabaptism*, ed. Marc Lienhard (The Hague, Neth.: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977) 39-40.

[91] Klaassen, *Anabaptism* rev. ed. 12-13.

[92] Reflecting on the abiding dualism between meditation and the demands of daily life, medieval historian M. C. Smit remarked that "the tension which the ascetic never resolved between heavenly calling and cultural task has . . . put its permanent stamp on Western culture and bequeathed asceticism as an irrepressible challenge . . . to the reformation." Smit, "Culture and Salvation" 121.

[93] Smith 24.

Lest we assume that separation from the world necessarily begets stern, dour people, sociologist James Urry reminds us of the playful side of Mennonite life to which few outsiders were privy.[96] At home, Mennonites enjoyed a range of pleasures: eating, drinking, smoking, joking and dancing. According to Urry, it was only in the late nineteenth century, when Mennonites embraced evangelical worship or aspired to middle-class respectability, that this "low" culture fell into disrepute. Evangelical religion sought to bring the secular life of the congregation under its influence; it would not suffer vulgarity, nor any activity that did not obviously glorify God. Subsequent assimilation into the North-American evangelical sub-culture nearly obliterated bawdy and physical aspects of

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[94] Marlene Epp, "The Mennonite Girls' Homes of Winnipeg: A Home Away From Home," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988): 111.

[95] Isaac Horst, a contemporary Mennonite apologist, justifies the long-standing practice of segregation by characterizing Mennonite society as "a green oasis in the dreary desert of the world." In Horst's view community "guidelines" protect the oasis against the encroachment of the desert, but outsiders "see the guidelines as a fence around the oasis. They fear the close confines of its welcome greenery. Much as they long for the shelter of its cooling trees, they still desire to retain the privilege to dash out into the burning desert at will. They do not realize that the inner peace replaces the desire after worldly lusts." *Why Grossdaudy?* qtd. in Craig D. Martin, "The Simple Life," *Manna* Sept.-Oct. 1991: 7-8.

[96] "Private Lives and Public Images: Mennonite Popular Culture in Historical Perspective," *Mennonite Mirror* Apr. 1990: 9-12.

Mennonite culture. In this way, evangelicalism maintained the dualism between physicality and Christian perfection.

In this religious context, Warkentin attempts to reconcile the conflicting worldviews of Mennonite pragmatism and the allusive nature of art and at the same time seeks to integrate women's experiences with the Christian faith. Warkentin's effort to resolve these conflicts takes her back to the Mary and Martha story of the Bible. As we have seen, the Mary and Martha story illustrates the antithesis between body and spirit, between the concerns of this world and the promise of the hereafter. Warkentin rejects these traditional interpretations that endorse cultural withdrawal, and instead adopts Luke 10:38-42 as a radical paradigm for women's complete participation in social and religious life, by balancing Marta's practical service with Mary's pious devotion.

In the Mary of the scriptures Warkentin finds a confirmation of beauty in religious life. *Chastity Belts* alludes to the Gospel's account of Mary anointing Christ's feet with costly perfume and drying them with her hair (Matt. 26:6-12, Mark 14:3-9, John 12:1-7):

> Why couldn't I have been Mary or Martha? The nuns always tell us about them. I always imagined I was a combination of both, but with more of Mary in me than Martha. I can see myself at the Master's feet; washing them, and drying them with my hair. What a beautiful thing. But I can be practical like Martha too. I want to care for others. To live my faith. (CB 10)

In Matthew's version, Jesus' disciples question Mary's stewardship of resources asking, "Why this waste?" But Christ defends her choice, saying that "she has done a beautiful thing to me . . . wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." (Matthew 26:10-12, NIV) Warkentin picks up on the spiritual significance of the aesthetic act. Like Mary's anointing, Warkentin's plays link salvation with artistic creation.

## III. *Chastity Belts*: Spiritual Dimensions of Theatrical Performance

A religious procession and singular dance frame the action of *Chastity Belts*. Three arches reaching out of a minimalist set and a Gregorian chant set the scene for an early morning religious procession from a monastery to a cathedral. At the beginning of the play, a young woman enters, dancing "with abandon her own free style of liturgical dance" (4). At the end of the play, the same woman takes her place on stage as a "prison-like door closing" sounds through the theatre. With "a look of profound joy on her face," the woman begins to "spin around slowly to triumphant music" (27). What is the connection between the first and the last dance? What is the significance of dance at all? In between the first and last dance, a woman named Julie narrates her story and, through a progression of flashbacks in eleven short scenes, enacts her spiritual journey from childhood to anchorite.

*Chastity Belts*, set in fourteenth-century England in the harbour town of Norwich, dramatizes the life of Julian of Norwich — "Julie" in *Chastity Belts* — the medieval mystic writer, counsellor, and theologian, famous for her *Revelations of Divine Love*, a collection of writings of divine visions. Julian of Norwich's respect for "the small and humble things"[97] and her unique understanding of the feminine nature of God make her a fitting character through whom to explore issues for Mennonite women. As a deeply regarded female writer, Julian of Norwich embodies the artistic gender-specific Christian identity that the Mennonite tradition excludes. Since little is known about Julian's life other than that she received her visions in 1373 and thereafter retired to an anchorage, Warkentin's historical imagination completes Julie's childhood and her life in the Norwich Beguinage.

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[97] "Revelations" 32 long text, ed. Catherine Jones, *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 1984) 283.

Although historical evidence is lacking for Julian's encounter with the Beguines, Norwich was the only city in England to have an active Beguinage during Julian's lifetime, and Julian's connection with it is plausible. Beguine communities, or Beguinages, thrived in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Europe as a philanthropic, religious movement for women who were not under vows. Originating in the Low Lands, many Beguines earned a living through weaving and tapestries, providing women with a concrete opportunity to serve God in community.[98]

Whereas the Beguines focussed specifically on the social and economic well-being of women, medieval mystic writers gave voice to women's spiritual encounters with God. The mystic writers, many of whom were women, gave expression to God's universal love, communicating their visions through intense dramatic and erotic imagery.[99] Julian of Norwich, England's best known mystic writer, developed a unique doctrine of the motherhood of God, describing Christ as "our Mother" who in his physical and sensual being connects humanity to the spirit God.[100]

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[98] In choosing a setting affirmative of women, Warkentin could have chosen from a host of heterodox sects, such as the Waldenses with whom Anabaptist followers had a lot in common, and who like the Beguines were highly receptive to female exhortation and leadership. The Waldenses, however, accepted both male and female in their circles, whereas the Beguines built communities exclusively for women. See Smith 17; Warkentin, Introduction, *Chastity Belts* 1; Katharina M. Wilson, introduction, *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Wilson xiii-xv; Gwendolyn Bryant, "The French Heretic Beguine: Marguerite Porete," Wilson 205-7.

[99] Wilson xv.

In *Chastity Belts*, Julie appears as an independent confident subject in conflict with her prescribed role in society: her convent education limits her agency to "child-rearing and embroidery;" Julie's father wishes to marry her to the insufferable Edwin of Loxely. The Beguinage offers Julie a safe place to think, study, and dance, but two elements threaten her place of refuge. First, the Black Plague stalks Julie like an ominous spectre, claiming the lives of her family, friends, and mentor. Second, a number of men, from priests and monks to father and groom, loom as controlling agents behind the scenes. In the end, Julie overcomes these obstacles to define the parameters of her own life and action.

Warkentin places the audience in a privileged position as soon as Julie dances on stage. Julie's first words are a request to the audience to keep her dance secret. She soon reveals that she is to become an anchorite and that "after tomorrow — Cardinal's Rule — no visitors" (5). The audience has never "met" Julie, and the play's detailed exposition indicates that Julie has not met them either. The audience plays the role of Julie's unknown but confidential friend, her last link to the outside world before she retreats to permanent isolation.

Warkentin's dramatic voice is anecdotal, punctuated with poetic text from Julian's *Revelations* as well as scriptural passages and religious rites. The poetic passages, no longer than one or two lines, usually find voice through the character of Mary, the Beguine leader. They function as thoughtful reflections on the action of the play. For example, when the Beguines open their door to the plague, Mary's line, "We battle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers" (19, Ephesians 6:12), refers to the spirit of selfish interest that characterized the religious orders. Soon after, she prophesies her own death and faith in providential care with "All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" (19).[101]

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[100] "Revelations" 58 long text, Wilson 286-7.

The scriptural passages and religious rites are usually undercut with an irreverent remark. "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (4, Mark 8:34), Julie recites in the religious procession of her initiation, and to the audience she quips, "Presumably the 'him' and 'his' applies to me too." This is one instance of many in which Warkentin upsets formal Christian discourse with a decidedly contemporary tongue-in-cheek articulation of women's perspective. Warkentin's mockery of scripture's reverential tone cracks its restrictive authority over women's lives. On the other hand, Julie's voice in prayer is sincere and disarming. For example, when Julie curses her Christian name — "What kind of a name is Ermentrude? A plague on it!" — she stops dead in her tracks, drops to her knees kissing her crucifix, and prays, "I didn't mean that. It just slipped out. Forgive me. It's been on all of our minds lately. There's talk that it's come back" (8). Julie's prayer is equally spontaneous when she calls Edwin of Loxely "a flea on a cur," then looks heavenward with "My apologies to your creatures. But did you hear what he said to me?" (7).

Julie performs playfully and passionately. Her text is laced with puns and clever retorts. Her voice alters in moments of crisis: it softens in a tender birthing scene and turns to cryptic metaphor when faced with the Black Plague: "My blood was like the cold stone of the cathedral. I couldn't move. . . . Then death ripped open all the old wounds" (18). Yet, despite some modulations in the light-hearted tone of the text, the most affecting scenes are communicated through visual and aural channels, which I will examine shortly.

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[101] Julian of Norwich's original words, made memorable by T. S. Eliot in "Little Gidding," line 170, 200.

Throughout the play, Warkentin effectively negotiates between moments of isolation and intimate communion. The actress cuddles a cloth blanket as she performs Julie's mother's grieving for her dead son, to which Julie's father responds brusquely, "There will be other children" (9). Julie's dance for the dead is a solitary ritual; the actress neither indicates other figures nor addresses the audience. At the end of the play, the actress stands alone on stage, her isolation highlighted with a single spot light and the sound of a prison door closing. The solitary female self here searches for communal dialogue, but ultimately does not attain it.

As a one-woman show, *Chastity Belts* naturally highlights the performer's solitude; yet the actress performs numerous exchanges that resemble dialogue. I have already mentioned the confidential relationship established with the audience. Other characters either impersonated or addressed by the actress are brought to life as imaginary presences on stage, including a mimed cat. Exchanges between Mary and Julie and Julie and Susan are particularly convincing. For example, during the plague years (scene 7), Mary invites the Beguines to join her in caring for those afflicted with the infectious disease. The actress enacts Mary as she passes by each Beguine searching their faces for an answer, then doubles as Julie when Mary approaches her and shifts back to Mary. Quick separation between the two characters heightens the conflict of the scene. When Julie assists her friend Susan in labour, the actress' tender speech and physical concentration on the birth convey an intimacy between the two women. (scene 9)

Although prayer as a theatrical convention, like the soliloquy, generally communicates a character's interior life, in *Chastity Belts* prayer also tentatively alludes to a dialogue between the human character and God. Julie's communication with God is easily staged: the actress simply crosses herself or looks heavenward. Figuring God's response is a challenge, since our contemporary naturalistic-based theatre tradition features no stage conventions to signify metaphysical entities, such as the medieval *figura* or the invisible spirits of Elizabethan theatre. Warkentin's solution is to convey divine agency through a variety of theatrical mediums. Cloth, music, and dance are interrelated theatrical manifestations of Julie's visions of "revelations of divine love," and, as I will show, each of these is central to the performance text.

Cloth is a recurring visual element in the play: various cloths indicate different locales, further the action of the play, and underscore its main themes. Embroidered and woven cloth indicate the convent and the Beguinage respectively. Pieces of cloth are used as funeral shrouds and a priest's cloak; a bundled-up cloth represents a baby. Figuratively, cloth demarcates a space for self expression. For example, Julie relates that the Beguines allow her to dance freely on layers of cloth spread on the floor. When Julie expresses intense grief over the death of her friends, she drapes a large piece of red cloth on the floor as if over a body and then uses it in a liturgical dance. (scene 7 and 9) As an accessory in dance, cloth becomes an extension of the woman's body. Swirling through space, the large piece of cloth enhances the fluidity of the dancer's movement and seems to take the body itself in flight. Its light and airy texture suggests the immaterial spiritual realm.

Beyond designating fixed locales and providing a conduit for self expression, cloths are used to portray the fragility of the Beguinage's existence in a male-dominated society. When the institutional church closes down the Beguinage, Warkentin's stage direction reads that Julie is "packing away things at the Beguinage," (24) which, beside a handful of other props, include textile properties. In scene 6, Warkentin underscores the cloth's symbolic function with a verbal image in which cloth signifies the suffering of God's servants. The actress takes a sheet and shakes it out before draping it over a table. Speaking as Mary, but using a text of Julian of Norwich, she prophesies, "For God's servants, Holy Church, shall be shaken in sorrow & anguish in this world, as men shake a cloth in the wind" (17).[102] Julie physically performs this verbal image later in the play when she shakes out a large blanket of red cloth in her lament for the death of Mary and other Beguines: "SHE SHAKES IT OUT. LETS IT DRAPE OVER THE FLOOR AS IF OVER THE DEAD. A LITURGICAL DANCE TO THE WOMEN'S VOICE SINGING A LATIN MASS. GATHERS UP THE CLOTH AND HOLDS IT CLOSE" (19-20). Holding the cloth as a bundle recalls Julie enacting her mother grieving the death of her son, "cradling a bundle as if it were a child" (9).

Warkentin uses music judiciously to indicate locale and emphasize the dichotomy between male and female agency. In scene 7, Julie's dance for the death of Mary and the other Beguines is accompanied by women's voices singing a Latin mass, which may suggest a larger cosmic lament for Mary's death and the demise of the Beguinage. In scenes 1 and 11, Gregorian chants accompany Julie's processions to the cathedral and her anchorage. In the first scene, the chants are sung by men and women; in the final scene by men only. Considering that in *Chastity Belts* male figures act as a threat to Julie's safety and freedom, the chant could be construed as a patriarchal victory. It would seem that Julie is defeated, because she voluntarily submits to the patriarchy of the church and restricts her freedom behind cloistered walls. Simultaneously, the male voices may suggest an uneasy truce between Julie and the men who have tried to control her destiny. In retiring to the anchorage, Julie renounces the freedom she enjoyed at the Beguinage, but she also escapes marriage to a man she doesn't love. Triumphant sacred music during Julie's final spinning dance underscores the possibility that despite external bondage, Julie attains inner freedom.

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[102] Note the passive sentence structure used to describe "God's servants," whereas "men" take the active verb. Although the original passage means men as gender-inclusive, in Warkentin's play the gender-specific term signals the idea that men present an active threat to women's safety.

Dance in *Chastity Belts* inverts the body/spirit dualism by performing the physical art of dance as a legitimate spiritual discipline. Scene 1 introduces the rift between spirituality and physicality. As Julie dances in, she silences the audience and with "a complicitous smile" whispers, "Shhhh, don't tell the nuns" (4). Dancing, Warkentin implies, is religiously suspect. Direct audience address implicates the spectators in this illicit activity. In the same scene Julie confides,

> It's all I've ever wanted, you know. To dedicate myself to piety and poverty... [hesitates] and chastity. Ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up and it was always: a dancing nun. Why not? They have Singing Nuns so why not a Dancing one? (5)

This question is one the play throws out rhetorically.[103] Julie's hesitation in committing to the vow of chastity underscores the price of piety: physical and worldly withdrawal. Piety, as it is defined by the church, commands complete renounciation of carnal desires as well as material possessions. The concept of a Dancing Nun sounds ludicrous simply because it juxtaposes the world-renouncing 'Nun' with the physically engaging 'dance'. Over against the body/spirit split, Warkentin introduces dance as a point of intersection between the sacred and the profane.

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[103] What Warkentin briefly mentions here but explores more fully in *Mary and Martha* is censorship of particular art forms. Mennonites accept the "immaterial" art of music as a legitimate expression of their faith but frown on the bodily dance and the solitary art of writing. See also Al Reimer, "Who is Afraid of

Through the words of Mary, the revered Beguine leader, Warkentin proposes a theology of dance that locates the spirit in the physical body. Mary reads,

> Our father, St. Augustine explains. *Cupiditas* is the love of anything for its own sake. *Caritas* is the love of God and the love of everything else in order to come to that love. This means we are to love the world. To notice flowers and trees — to find joy in things. And each other. And pleasure in our bodies. (14)

Warkentin's explanation of *caritas* is clearly a deviation from St. Augustine. As founder of the first monastic order, St. Augustine advocated celibacy for the Christian in search of God's love. In contrast, Warkentin's search begins with an embrace of the (female) body. Mary's speech resonates in every dance that is performed after it.

As the ritual procession to the anchorage (scene 11) symbolizes Julie's death to this world, so the play's final image of Julie slowly spinning around to triumphant music reveals a glimpse of her rebirth. Reference should be made here to the "dancing soul," a popular image in Medieval mystic writing. In this image, the soul dances in a circular

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Mennonite Art?" *Mennonite Mirror* Jan. 1989, rpt. in *Embracing the World* 73-4.

motion around its midpoint which is God.[104] *Chastity Belts*' final spinning dance implies the inward dance of the soul at peace with itself and the spirit of God it finds there. However, in the physical medium of theatre, the journey to the inner light is communicated through the physical reality of the performer's body. Unlike the mystic's dance which remains internal, the performative dance moves beyond the interior soul to a representation of outwardly directed charity. *Chastity Belts*' final image of the inward-looking soul remains in tension with Warkentin's dramatic exploration of meeting God in the external world.

Dance performance in *Chastity Belts* is a rebellious act against an ascetic theology that disparages women's bodies as carnal temptations.[105] In a live performance, the dancer's body is an immediate sensuous presence. It is significant that Julie always dances alone, without a partner, expressing herself without a man's leading steps. The solitary dance undermines patriarchal prerogative; yet the absence of a group of dancers heightens a sense of longing for a communal expression of harmony.

Julie's dances for the dead are the longest dance sequences in the play and are the play's most profound expressions of spiritual union. In scene 9, a voice-over accompanies Julie's dance for death of her friend Susan. As in her dance for Mary's death in scene 7, Julie draws a red cloth as if over a body, then uses it in liturgical dance. The voice-over is the voice of the actress reading a poem by St. Anselm based on St. Augustine's exegesis of Psalm 101:

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[104] John Howard, "The German Mystic: Mechthild of Magdeburg," Wilson 158. Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963) 29-31. Van der Leeuw cites numerous medieval songs celebrating the divine dance. One, attributed to the Dutch anchorite Sister Bertke, is worth quoting here:

> Who understands the exalted dance,
> The bowing, bending, waiting stance,
> The spinning round forever?
> The mincing pace, the whirling space,
> The flight that ceases never? (31)

[105] Wilson xi.

> And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother?
> are you not like the mother who, like a hen
> gathers her chicks under her wings?
> Truly, Lord, you are a mother;
> for both they who are in labour
> and they who brought forth are accepted by you.
> ...run under the wings of Jesus your mother
> and lament your griefs under his feathers.
> Ask that your wounds may be healed
> and that, comforted, you may live again. (23)

The image of Jesus as mother, echoing Julian of Norwich's vision, connects Julie with the transcendent God. The recited poem, red cloth, and dance, together express a complete experience of God's comforting presence.

Creating art as a way to commune with God brings Warkentin to an almost Catholic experience of the symbol. Warkentin works out of the assumption that transcendent reality can be directly experienced through physical senses. Linking other-world reality to tangible objects recalls the Catholic belief that the transcendent may be fully experienced in the material sign, such as Christ's body in the bread of the sacrament, healing power in relics, and sacred space in church architecture. However, unlike the Catholic approach, Warkentin claims spiritual access not by circumscribing sacred reality to specific symbols nor by rejecting its identification with materiality, as her Mennonite ancestors did, but by opening up all of creation to the potential of divine penetration. Art, grounded in the present world through its manipulation of materials yet transcending the function of daily use, mediates between a world-fleeing and a world-engaging spirituality.

Warkentin's mediating approach (between self and community, body and spirit, art and the transcendent) extends to the place of women in Christendom. Scene 1 introduces the conflict between women and religion when Julie gives a tour of the anchorage:

> This window on the far side joins my servant's quarters. [GIGGLES] Sounds grand doesn't it? Imagine — my own personal servant. She's a young girl, about 15, I think, from our town. She'll be my link to the outside world. . . . She'll take care of everything. The cooking, washing, mending. I won't have to do any of the domestic things. I'll practically be the "husband"! (6)

Clearly, women who through chastity pledge devotion to God gain masculine privelege in this society. In this scene Warkentin plays out the negative implications of the Mary-and-Martha dualism: the domestic fetches everything while the anchorite contemplates higher truths. Since the contemplative role is traditionally assigned to the man, a woman who enters the ascetic life can rise above the supposed limitations of her sex and become like man,[106] or as Julie quips "the husband". Thus, the religious ideal of chastity cuts women off from the physical world and their sex. Warkentin responds to this alienation through a theatrical reconstruction of an historic religious community that nurtures women's identities and secures, rather than severs, ties with their gender.

In *Chastity Belts*, the Beguinage represents a safe haven, a community where Julie is accepted and empowered. We first hear of the Beguinage as Julie listlessly embroiders a cloth according to convent stipulations — "The sisters say only boys can continue studying, but that I 'should be thankful for my great gift for embroidering'" (11). In contrast to her obedient stitching, Julie presents a woven cloth made by the Beguines. "Rumour is they're heretics. I'm interested. Brings out the rebel in me. I think they're rather nice. Very peaceful" (11). Two characteristics, rebelliousness and peacefulness, distinguish the Beguine community. They recall similar labels applied to sixteenth-century Anabaptists. As committed pacifist, Anabaptists were persecuted by city officials around Europe as rebels and peace disturbers. As Mennonite pacifism was disruptive to the social order and therefore considered dangerous, so too the Beguine movement, by virtue of providing a peaceful place for women, disrupts the social order and will be opposed.

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[106] see Wilson x.

A link between the Beguines and Anabaptism is further developed in scene 4 when Julie visits the Beguinage at Norwich. Consider the following passage,

> They devote themselves to caring for the sick and the poor. The first thing they did here was open an infirmary. To support themselves, they weave cloth for the monasteries and aristocracy. They have quite a thriving business. (12)

The Beguines mirror Anabaptist communities in their emphasis on practical charity combined with a willingness to be self-supporting. Note that economic prosperity elicits resentment from established businesses. Part of the Beguines' unpopularity lay in their threat to the guilds.[107] Mennonites have also experienced resentment from their Ukrainian and non-Mennonite Canadian neighbours who were financially less successful.

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[107] Wilson xv.

In Julie's description of the Beguinage, Warkentin draws the ideological tie between the two religious communities even closer:

> We have 28 women so far and a dozen or so children and — you may have noticed — no men. Many of the women are married but they choose to live here. No priest, abbess — or husband — telling them what to do. We don't take vows. We are not an ordained religious order. We just try to follow God as best we can. We try to live simply, we like to say, so that the poor may simply live. There's no clerical control and that suits me just fine. (12)

Smith calls Anabaptism "the party of the common people" whose central tenets of faith include:

> [no] religious hierarchy of any sort, basing both their faith and practice on the example of the New Testament church, preaching a voluntary, free, and independent religious organization entirely separated from the state.[108]

Calvin Redekop, cautious of drafting a definitive list of Anabaptist characteristics, nevertheless mentions the following traits as valid interpretations of basic Anabaptist teachings:

> the recovery of the congregational authority, the recovery of early Christian communism, the rejection of authority of the state . . . the emphasis on personal and congregational ethics . . . love and non-resistance.[109]

The similarities in the foregoing four passages are striking. They suggest that Warkentin constructs the historic Beguine movement as a female Reformation based on Anabaptist principles. Warkentin describes the Beguines as a kind of female Anabaptist order and it is in this place that Warkentin finds her Eden: a community that embraces women, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. "They don't even mind if I dance! They've laid cloth across the floor so I won't wake up the babies with all my leaping" (13).

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[108] Smith 1-2.

[109] Redekop, *Mennonite Society* 177.

In the edenic Beguinage no priest is necessary for the sharing of the sacraments. Julie, enacting the Beguine leader Mary, simply pours wine from a pitcher and pronounces "taste and see that the Lord is good as is this vintage" (15). Nor is celibacy required for holy living. As noted earlier in my discussion of dance, Mary misappropriates St. Augustine's definition of *caritas* in support of the physical and sexual freedom of the Beguines. The holy word becomes flesh, literally, in women's love, pleasure, and desire. It is a wisdom cheerfully punctuated with "whistling" and "cat-calling" (14). Warkentin deviates from the historical Beguines who did live by chastity, although they took no formal vow,[110] in order to erase the difference between carnality and Christian perfection.

The Beguines' commitment to service in the material world is tested when the Black Plague returns to Norwich. As the religious must respond to the crisis in some way, the play heightens the conflict between the world-shunning monks and the world-embracing Beguines. Like the Levites passing by on the other side, the priests shut themselves up in their monasteries and throw bricks at the masses outside. The Beguines' response is to serve the dying. Mary and five other Beguines decide to open their home to the plague and its victims. But Julie, afraid of death, retreats and, like Peter betraying Christ, turns her back on the suffering.

Soon after the death of Mary, under increased opposition from the institutional church, the Beguine community disbands. In a final act of rebellion, Julie escapes her imminent marriage to Edwin of Loxely by retiring to an anchorage. Julie's decision to enter an anchorage is fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, audiences familiar with the historical Julian of Norwich will interpret Julie's entry into the anchorage as a spiritually fruitful act; they know that Julian will make an original contribution to cultural and religious life. On the other hand, within the world of the play, Julie's entry severs her connection with the world of women, practical service, and an opportunity to find God in "the flowers and trees . . . and pleasure in our bodies."

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[110] Bryant 205 and Wilson xiv.

In the solitary figure on stage, any sign of community is conspicuously absent. Yet Julie's isolation is tempered with the words "All shall be well. All shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well" (27). These words seem to hold out the possibility for integrity in less than edenic circumstances. Julie may die to things of this world and proclaim herself crucified to Christ, but she takes her strong sense of self with her into her cell. Warkentin seems to imply that salvation can be worked out even in the institutional church. Julian of Norwich's own interpretation of the words "all shall be well" attributes cosmic significance to those things of which the powerful take no notice.[111] Warkentin does the same in her staging of the supposedly "insignificant": women's suffering, birth, rape, the act of weaving and homemaking, a simple dance.

Throughout the play, Warkentin constructs an opposition between men and women. She one-sidedly characterizes men as either deliberately causing the suffering of others or remaining oblivious to it. For example, the women of the Beguinage serve the people and die a martyr's death. Men of the cloth, on the other hand, ignore the people they are anointed to serve. I have already mentioned Julie's father, who at the death of his son gives his wife cold comfort, saying "there will be other children." In scene 8 Julie recounts how Edward of Loxely receives permission to marry her and then attempts to secure their betrothal with sexual intercourse. But, by mistake, Edwin rapes the wrong girl, Julie's best friend Susan. Julie's father recommends Edwin go on a pilgrimage and make another attempt upon his return. This event, as well as Julie's memory of childhood abuse, underscores the point that women's safety and well-being cannot be entrusted to men. Julie forgives her father — *"Seventy times seven"* (22) — as she also must forgive herself for forsaking the Beguines during the Black Plague; but notwithstanding the healing power of forgiveness , Warkentin is careful to maintain opposition between men and women. It seems that by giving voice to women's pain, Warkentin cannot afford to listen to the concerns and suffering of men.

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[111] Julian's words: "One time, our good Lord said: 'Everything shall be well'; and another time he said: 'You shall see for yourself that everything is well.' And in these two statements the soul understood a number of things. One was that we know that He will take note of not only the noble and great things but also small and humble things--and things done to one another. . . . For it is his will that we understand that the smallest thing shall not be forgotten." "Revelation," 32 long text, Wilson 283.

In fact, Warkentin goes to great length to drive home the male/female opposition, best illustrated by Julie's parody of the local priest's tirade against women: "Thou art the cause of all sin. Through Eve and Eve alone came death & destruction" (16). Warkentin's stage directions specify that the actress should enact the priest in an "overdone 'fire & brimstone' fundamentalist-type preacher voice." Obviously, the parody is directed at twentieth-century North American evangelicalism. Warkentin is prepared to sacrifice historical semblance to take a stab at a contemporary manifestation of religious patriarchy. Indirectly, Warkentin compares the persecution of the Beguines with the oppression of women today, particularly women who live in an evangelical culture, as do the Mennonites.

In *Chastity Belts* Warkentin struggles with the same questions that her Mennonite ancestors had to answer, that is, how to create a viable Christian ethic for lay people which can be practiced in the concrete reality of this world. More specifically, Warkentin develops a spiritual identity for women whose subordinate position in society further limits their religious participation. *Chastity Belts* presents the Beguinage as a women's utopia, a world-embracing religious centre where women are accepted and empowered to serve God. Like the Beguines, the early Anabaptists too worshipped in communities democratically governed, challenging civil and religious authority, committed to charity and active service. These elements still characterize present-day Mennonites to a degree; however, in their four-hundred year history, the Mennonites also escaped the world and turned in on themselves, thereby compromising their original mandate and, Warkentin implies, neglecting the opportunity to create space for women.

The monastic life which in Catholicism at least gives women a place for scholastic opportunity was abolished by the Reformers who did not open up religious participation to women. Although women were publicly active during the Reformation years,[112] once the Mennonite church became fully institutionalized, they returned to hearth and home. Even today, women rarely fill church leadership positions and often carry the burden of sustaining daily life to free up men for church responsibilities. Examples are still easy to find if we think of the women who babysit in the nursery while their husbands attend worship service, or those who prepare refreshments for board meetings.

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[112] Typically, women's voices often received expression in martyrdom. The *Martyr's Mirror* contains letters written by women from prison before their execution. Of the 1,000 martyrs listed in the *Mirror*, one-third were women. Reimer, *Mennonite Literary Voices* 38.

Seeking divine access for women beyond male-sanctioned roles and morality, Warkentin takes her cue from the Anabaptist reformers who sought direct access to God unmediated by professional clergy. Warkentin does not dismiss domestic servanthood as an irrelevant spiritual avenue but presents this traditional feminine vocation as an incomplete expressions of women's encounter with God. The creation of art offers women another way to commune with God outside of prescribed roles and male-dominated religious institutions.

Warkentin maintains dramatic opposition between women and men in her second play, *Mary and Martha*, as she continues to explore the possibility of a safe haven for women. *Mary and Martha* is set in an historic Mennonite girls' home, which like the medieval Beguinage is an all-female organization, although its utopian possibilities are not so easily realized. *Mary and Martha* contributes to a remembering of Mennonite women by speaking for, Warkentin writes, "the modern unheralded Anabaptist women who chose to enter by the narrow gate; who chose a sort of martyrdom for the *Maedchenheim*."[113]

## IV. *Mary and Martha*: A Mennonite Anchorage

The tension between Christian perfection and life in this world which Warkentin harmonizes in *Chastity Belts* is brought to a less satisfying union in her play *Mary and Martha*, where the struggle between isolation and integration plays itself out in generations rather than through one character. In the monologue of *Chastity Belts*, a union of opposites resides in the single speaker; in the multi-character play, *Mary and Martha*, two generations represent opposing views, and Warkentin needs to create a "third" character to make the connections. In *Mary and Martha* this character is the writer.

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[113] *Mary and Martha* xii.

The generational struggle is set in a *Maedchenheim*, a girls' home in Winnipeg that provides spiritual and practical support for Mennonite domestics working in the city. With an influx of Mennonite refugees during the 1920s and 30s, when labour for men and boys was scarce, Mennonite girls worked as domestics in the city to help pay off their families' *Reiseschuld*, the travel debt to the Canadian Pacific Railway. Mennonite churches built girls' homes as safe havens to protect these girls from the "heathenish city." In time, as the travel debt was paid off and Mennonites lost some of their fear of urban life, the girls' homes lost their initial purpose. Mennonite girls assimilated more easily into urban life and used domestic jobs as stepping stones to clerical, teaching, or medical positions.

Based on actual girls' homes in Winnipeg which operated from 1925 to 1959, Warkentin's fictional *Maedchenheim* is a central meeting place for Mennonite girls to enjoy social interaction and receive biblical instruction. Like the authentic girls' homes, this home operates under supervision of the church council and is run by a strict disciplinarian named Marta Epp. Actual events and debates surrounding the girls' homes find their way into the script. For example, the matron of the Mennonite Brethren *Maedchenheim*, Anna Thiessen, lobbied and convinced city hall to implement a half day off per week for live-in domestics.[114] This accomplishment forms part of Marta's background in *Mary and Martha*. Prediger Fast's uneasiness in Marta's company illustrates the church boards' general awkwardness in dealing with the capable *Maedchenheim* matrons. Fast's comment that Marta doesn't "know how to deal with young girls nowadays" (62) recalls a similar critique of Anna Thiessen when the Mennonite Brethren *Maedchenheim* shut down.[115]

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[114] Marlene Epp, "The Mennonite Girls' Homes of Winnipeg: A Home Away From Home," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988): 105.

*Mary and Martha* pays tribute to all the women who worked and lived at the historical girls' homes. Although the girls' homes have been the subject of several essays,[116] *Mary and Martha* is the first fictional and dramatic treatment of these unique homes. Skilfully avoiding lengthy exposition, Warkentin conveys the girls' homes' historical significance: facilitating an unprecedented migration of Mennonites from the country to the city and providing a refuge for young girls away from their families. A 1933 report on the Maria-Martha *Maedchenheim*, a Winnipeg home operated by the Mennonite Brethren Conference, included the following statement: "The Maria-Martha home is a very important branch of our mission, the full meaning of which we would acknowledge if one day we should be without it."[117] In *Mary and Martha*, Warkentin explores the "full meaning" of the girls' homes. *Mary and Martha* is at once a tribute to the girls' homes, a critique of the homes' separatist ideology, and a lament for the passing of a vision that recognized women's need for a safe refuge. According to Warkentin the homes' true purpose is their commitment to women's well-being, although, as I will shortly demonstrate, Warkentin's own commitment to women far surpasses the vision of the homes' initial founders.

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[115] Marlene Epp 112.

[116] See Marlene Epp, "The Mennonite Girls' Homes of Winnipeg: A Home Away from Home," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6 (1988): 100-14; Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* ; Harold S. Bender, "Girls' Homes," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* II: 521-2. In the introduction to *Mary and Martha*, Warkentin also cites Frieda Esau Klippenstein, "'Doing What We Could': Mennonite Domestic Servants in Winnipeg, 1920s to 1950s," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 7 (1989): 145-67; and Eric Rempel, "Eben-Ezer Girls' Home, Winnipeg (1926-1959)," Winnipeg: unpublished paper, Mennonite Heritage Centre, 1977.

[117] qtd. in Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 475.

The action of the play takes place within the confines of the *Maedchenheim*. The set consists of a detailed reconstruction of a living/dining room. The realistic set design localizes the dramatic action to Winnipeg in the late 1950s and emphasizes the home's aesthetically impoverished surroundings. Warkentin's directions specify severe simplicity:

> The Home is simply decorated with solid, sensible furniture. Any feeling of warmth seems forced and exists pragmatically. There are no extra frills. The only luxury seems to lie in the piano . . . piled high with hymnals, it too serves a purpose in the *Maedchenheim*. (xvi)

On the walls, "scripture verses in German Gothic script" and "annual *Maedchenheim* photographs" complete the impression of an orderly home committed to the preservation of the Mennonite faith and the German language.

It is 1959. Only five women live at the Mary-Martha home, although there is mention of other Mennonite girls meeting regularly at the home for Bible study and socials. Three day-domestics work at their employer's home but reside at the *Maedchenheim*: Erika, whose wicked sense of humour and independent drive constantly test Marta Epp's rules; Dorothy, a timid and conciliatory girl; and Mary, a new arrival to the home, whose perceptive and candid observations highlight the conflict. The other two women are Marta and her sister Emma. The dramatic conflict centres on Marta Epp's uncompromising rule and inability to change. The three girls living in the *Maedchenheim* rebel against Marta's prohibitions on movies, boyfriends, and cosmetics. Marta's rules, intended to protect the girls from worldly temptations, pass judgement on any activity that challenges order and authority, including such "deviant" behaviour as singing popular songs or writing poetry. Emma, Marta's sister, tries to keep the peace in the house. Her playful approach to life foils Marta's severity, but does not challenge her authority in a direct way. A complicating factor is the church board's decision to close the *Maedchenheim* and redirect its funds to the mission field. The board believes the *Maedchenheim* has outlived its usefulness now that Mennonite girls adapt more easily to a Canadian way of life.

The conflict reaches a crisis when Marta herself transgresses a fundamental principle of the Mennonite faith: she hits a girl in anger for dating a boy of Ukrainian descent. In shame over what she has done, Marta's rigid exterior also crumbles. She reveals the horrors she had witnessed as a child during the Russian revolution when the Ukrainian anarchists killed her parents. Partly in response to her childhood experiences, Marta became committed to building a safe home for other girls, a home now threatened by external closure as well as by Marta's own moral failing. Driven by a new compassion for Marta, as well as their personal need for a safe home, the young girls join Marta in her fight to keep the *Maedchenheim* open. But despite their concerted effort, the church board decides to terminate the *Maedchenheim* and the girls leave the home to embrace a new life in the city. Marta must accept the conclusion of her years of service.

*Mary and Martha*, Warkentin's M.A. thesis, features an engaging topic, strong characterization and layered thematic development. However, it is as yet unfinished, hampered by unnecessary plot complications and a tendency towards tangential rhetoric or redundancy, particularly where it concerns the character of Mary. In my analysis, I will highlight particularly well-written sections and point out some technical shortcomings. As well, I will discuss Warkentin's treatment of gender politics in Mennonite society and her *apologia* for writing within a Mennonite context.

*Mary and Martha* follows a traditional climactic play structure. Warkentin divides the action into nine scenes, but an inherent three-act play structure emerges from the text. Act I (scenes 1 to 3) develops the generational conflict within the home and introduces the external threat of closure. Scenes 1 and 2 are set before and after a Thursday night Bible study session; scene 3 takes place around the dinner table a week later. Act II (scenes 4 to 7) takes place on the night of the annual *Maedchenheim* party. It heightens the internal conflict and presents Marta's breakdown. It ends with the women huddled together in a strategic planning session to save the *Maedchenheim*. Act III (scenes 8 and 9) functions as an extended epilogue. It is four months later. The home has closed and the girls are leaving. Scene 8 presents Mary's goodbye, when she challenges Marta's assumptions about the value of art and self-sacrifice. Scene 9 is two months later when Marta and Emma are preparing to move. Four hundred letters have arrived at the *Maedchenheim* from all over the world. Reflecting on the bags of mail, containing expressions of thanks from former *Maedchenheim* residents, Marta and Emma piece together the meaning of their lives.

Some of these scenes are particularly well-crafted. A good example is the ironically humorous effect of a Sunday dinner in scene 3, during which Marta's religious rhetoric and Erika's provocative remarks thwart any attempt at pleasant conversation but make for an entertaining scenario. The mood turns dark when Marta censures Mary's writing. The icy exchange establishes an opposition between Marta's practical service and Mary's contemplative life and serves to align the audience's sympathy with the writer. At the end of the same scene, Erika (and the audience) discover Marta's softer side. Erika and Dorothy page through the "*Maedchenheim* Bible", a journal chronicling over 30 years of service. Erika reads bits here and there, at first sarcastically, then with increasing awareness of the home's significance. They come across an entry in which Marta writes tenderly about a nine-year old girl arriving at the *Maedchenheim*. "She has terrible nightmares and I can only hold her in the night when she screams," the entry reads (44). Immediately thereafter, Emma enters and informs Erika of the board's plan to close the *Maedchenheim*.

Warkentin's characterizations are generally strong, with the possible exception of Mary. Erika is a sympathetic rebel whose disclosure of an unhappy home life is a convincing complication of her character. Dorothy as the deferential "good girl" has enough depth of character to warrant her later revelations of abuse. Prediger Fast, minister and liaison between the *Maedchenheim* and the church board, vacillates between condescension and nerves. Warkentin endows Fast with the smooth, patronizing rhetoric of a revered community leader, which, faced with opposition, is reduced to inane prattle. Marta Epp is a particularly sharply-drawn character who embodies all the characteristics commonly associated with the biblical Martha. Marta is an upright hardworking woman who expects no less from the girls under her care. Her commitment to service is summed up in the stoic motto, "All we are called to do, is to do what we can" (see *Mary and Martha*, pages 10, 19, 25, 92, 104). Marta's work ethic keeps the home running smoothly despite setbacks and financial restraints, but it does not endear the elderly matron to the young girls living in the home.

Warkentin evokes a blend of repulsion, sympathy, and respect for the Mennonite matron. Marta most often appears on stage in supreme composure, although kitchen pots clanging off-stage disclose some of her inner turmoil. In interaction with the girls, Marta's discourse is highly formal, laced with scripture quotations and other moralizing cliches. Exchanges with Prediger Fast reveal Marta's inner strength, as she deflects all of Fast's flattery and compliments. Through blunt and uncompromising speech, Marta establishes herself as a force to be reckoned with. Only with Emma does Marta communicate her feelings a little more freely, but even then she pre-empts any real dialogue. Moments of solitude reveal glimpses of Marta's repressed inner life — for example, at the end of scene 2, she sits alone in half-light with her hands folded, and in the closing tableau of scene 8, after holding up a jar of preserves like an offering, she opens her hands and lets it shatter. Finally, Marta's breakdown as a result of hitting Erika is a convincing psychological development. At the same time, her monologue of traumatic war-time memories also functions as a eulogy to the thousands of Mennonites who died in the Ukraine. Emma's quiet recitation of scripture verses throughout Marta's monologue resemble liturgical responses to Marta's narrative. What emerges is a sensitive portrait of a woman shaped as much by her own will-power as by external circumstances.

Warkentin explores the significance of the *Maedchenheim* from a feminist perspective, and, in so doing, redefines the concept of the Other. It is not the outside world, but the male members of their own community that threaten women's safety at the *Maedchenheim*. The *Maedchenheim*'s initial purpose may have been to protect girls from non-Mennonite influences, but in Warkentin's play, the home becomes a refuge from the patriarchal Mennonite world. In scene 7, the dramatic conflict between the two generations of women living in the home dissolves into a broader conflict between men and women. In this scene, the young women disclose their sad secrets of abuse and pain. Like the older women, they too have a need for a safe haven. Faced with the home's closure, the conflict between the women is resolved as they band together to fight the church board.

A new enemy demands a new strategy of defence. Marta's old strategy of preserving tradition is inadequate, but *Selbschutz*, self-defence, empowers women to fight the enemy. Warkentin does not stage the women's battle with the church board, but scene 8 and 9 disclose some of the action after the fact. Although the home could not be saved, Warkentin suggests that the women's decision to fight back was in itself worth the effort: "At least we stepped out of silence and submission. For once, we defended ourselves," says Mary (91).

In advocating self-defence, Warkentin breaks with a long tradition of Mennonite pacifism beginning with women's silent martyrdom as recorded in the *Martyr's Mirror*. The *Martyr's Mirror* recounts stories of martyrdom for the edification of future generations, inspiring them to live, and if need be die, for the faith. The book itself is a vehicle for evangelism by witnessing to the sacrifices made for the faith and encouraging others to do likewise. The dialogue in *Mary and Martha* makes indirect references to various torture techniques inflicted on these early Anabaptist women: "You walk around with a mouthful of gunpowder" (78) and "You will never open your mouth to protect yourself - like a screw is clamped on your tongue" (101). These phrases establish a connection between the early martyrs and the women of the *Maedchenheim*. It seems to me that Warkentin's purpose is not to compare the severity of early martyrdom with the trials of modern Mennonite women, but the connection nevertheless suggests a long tradition of sacrifice, a tradition that Warkentin seeks to break.

In *Mary and Martha*, Marta Epp exemplifies a life lived according to the precepts of the *Martyr's Mirror*. Like the *Martyr's Mirror*, Marta promotes a way of life that through silent sacrifice witnesses to others. The young girls expose the shortcomings of this way of life:

> DOROTHY. You know what Miss Epp says: "You are an open book read by many. That's how you have to live."
>
> ERIKA. Well, your employer was illiterate. (6-7)

Whereas Marta asserts, "How we live is the only Bible some people may ever read" (21), Mary argues, "Actions and words are a language to be interpreted" (88). At the end of the play, it is Emma who ultimately breaks through Marta's prison of self-sacrifice:

> MARTA. I would have died for you.
>
> EMMA. You already did! You died for me when you were twelve, because you never lived for yourself!
>
> [MARTA SITS IN STUNNED SILENCE]
>
> EMMA. Marta, there have been martyrs enough. Enough sacrifices. (102)

Warkentin challenges the ideology of the *Martyr's Mirror* that keeps women in a position of silent suffering. By telling each other their stories, the women of the *Maedchenheim* purge themselves of the obligation to live a life of sacrifice. The young girls of the *Maedchenheim* not only tell their own stories but also listen to the story Marta has to tell. Once they understand how historical events shape their heritage, the girls are free to let go of the old ways of doing things.

A puzzling element in *Mary and Martha* is the relationship triangle between Marta, Prediger Fast, and Marta's sister Emma. Warkentin proposes that in earlier years Fast courted Marta, but she spurned him and accepted the leadership of the *Maedchenheim* instead. Fast then asked Emma to marry him, but Emma remained loyal to her sister and joined her at the *Maedchenheim*. The love triangle seems to me an unnecessary plot complication. Its late introduction in scene 5 detracts from the momentum of the dramatic action. Its full disclosure in the last scene fails to comment meaningfully on the previous action.

As I understand it, the disclosure of the relationship is meant to strengthen the depiction of Marta as a strong and independent woman. Marta's rejection of Fast's offer of marriage emphasizes Marta's subversive role in Mennonite society. Marta could have married had she wanted to; she chose to dedicate her life to the *Maedchenheim* rather than to fulfill the traditional Mennonite expectation of marriage and bearing children. Warkentin does not question the value of motherhood — indeed, she validates Marta's maternal relationship to the girls in the *Maedchenheim* throughout the play, especially in scene 3 where Erika reads about Marta's nurturing qualities in the "*Maedchenheim* Bible" — but she objects to a patriarchal view that validates women only as wives and child-bearers. Revelation of the past relationship is certainly meant to contribute to the multi-dimensionality of Marta's character; however, considering Warkentin's concern for female autonomy, I question whether romantic interaction with the opposite sex is the wisest choice for rounding out this female character. In my opinion, the past romance can be construed to be a "redemption" of Marta's spinsterhood. A romantic relationship with the opposite sex, even though not consummated, seems to be needed to validate Marta as a complete person. Unfortunately, the relationship actually detracts from rather than strengthens Warkentin's portrayal of Marta as having personal worth in and of herself.

In the last scene, disclosure of the love triangle contributes to the conflict between Marta and Emma. Unlike Marta, who claims to have made the right decision in rejecting Fast, Emma wonders if by marrying Fast she herself might not have found more happiness. Marta interprets Emma's musings as disloyalty to the *Maedchenheim* and a belittling of the sacrifices Marta has made, and indeed Emma does question Marta's self-sacrificial approach to life. However, Emma's communication with the church board behind Marta's back, requesting a retirement income for Marta, more than adequately justifies the conflict between the sisters. It gives Emma a valid reason to confront Marta's ethic of self-sacrifice, without referring to the relationship triangle in the past.

The disclosure of Fast's relationship with Marta modifies our earlier understanding of Fast's nervous behaviour. It is now apparent that Fast's awkwardness in dealing with Marta is perhaps more informed by their previous emotional relationship than by Fast's general uneasiness towards independent women. The relationship dilutes Fast's dramatic function as a representative of the Mennonite church board who are intimidated by Marta's independence. Furthermore, since the relationship requires Fast to be roughly the same age as the Epp sisters, Warkentin precludes interesting dramatic possibilities that might arise out of a conflict between a young male office bearer and an aged Mennonite matriarch.

A second weakness in the play lies in Warkentin's attempt to justify the position of the artist. The figure of Mary carries an ambivalent dramatic function, which is summed up in Marta's final critique of Mary, "You're a critic, not a witness" (92).

Indeed, Mary the writer must fulfill both roles, that of critiquing the *Maedchenheim*'s lack of aesthetic playful living, and that of witnessing to the *Maedchenheim*'s historical significance.

Mary appears in scene 1 as a newcomer, an eighteen-year-old girl from the farm who takes a domestic job in Winnipeg to help pay off her father's funeral. Mary's name invites a comparison with Marta. As Marta exemplifies the biblical Martha, so Mary alludes to the biblical Mary in her search for solitude and contemplation. The play makes continuous references to Mary writing alone in her bedroom, withdrawing from community life to give expression to her feelings and thoughts in isolation. Through the characters of Mary and Marta, Warkentin dramatizes the opposition between a communal and a private hermeneutic. The Mennonite community has traditionally favoured a communal hermeneutic of interpretation that locates spiritual authority with the fellowship of believers and subjects personal opinions to communal judgement. In contrast, the act of writing bypasses communal approval while giving expression to independent thought. The writer's private visions and interpretation may potentially undermine communal solidarity. Marta's rejection of Mary's writing illustrates Mennonite society's long-standing suspicion of the arts that further individual autonomy. Hence, Mary's observation that "in a Mennonite church you can play and sing publicly, but you cannot write in private" (56).

A defence of art, especially of poetry, is extremely important to Warkentin, who feels she needs to justify her own existence as a writer in the Mennonite community; however, this added concern stretches the scope of the story too much. By introducing the character of Mary, Warkentin tries to identify with her community while trying to expand its criteria for membership. In defending the artist's position in Mennonite society, Warkentin introduces a polemical element into a play about human relationships. In scene 4, Warkentin hints at Mary's fractured relationship with her father, but does not further develop this complication. As the author's mouthpiece, Mary remains a one-dimensional character.

Through the character of Mary, Warkentin tries to reconcile two sets of opposing views. First, Warkentin attempts to reconcile a life of active service and a life of contemplation. As a writer, Mary naturally represents the life of contemplation; unfortunately Mary the character is fully aware of her contemplative "role" and complains about her own inability to interact with the world directly. For example, in scene 4 Mary's dialogue with Dorothy veers off into a psychological exploration of the writer's inner conflict that does little to forward the dramatic action. Second, Warkentin uses the character of Mary to critique and affirm the accomplishments of the *Maedchenheim*. Mary's affirmation of the home finds voice in a poignant essay she writes near the end of the play, but her critique of the *Maedchenheim* borders on strident polemical arguments.

Another problem is that Mary seems to be too clever for an eighteen-year-old girl fresh from the farm. Her quick interjections of positive feedback have a tendency to sound hypocritical. For example, when Marta warns against indulging in such luxuries as a store-bought bouquet of flowers or taking a taxi-cab, Mary responds "We can also make idolatry of self-sacrifice," and then quickly adds, "You've taught me to value my wages" (89). Mary's response foreshadows Emma's legitimate critique of Marta's self-sacrificial approach to life, but her use of the universal "we" and her partial concession to Marta's value system verge on patronizing.

As the author's mouthpiece, Mary's defence of the importance of art is quite sophisticated. Mary attempts to justify the faculty of imagination:

> MARY. to have faith you have to imagine. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." You see what you believe.
>
> MARTA. Next you will say I need glasses.
>
> MARY. Reading glasses? (90)

The act of writing, Warkentin suggests, serves a spiritual function by imagining things unseen. Here, Warkentin tentatively puts forth a Renaissance evaluation of the imagination. The imagination, with which poets and other artists are particularly blessed, contemplates truths that are unseen, eternal, and divine. Does Warkentin suggest that the Martas, and by implication all Mennonites, need the writer to communicate transcendent truths to which lay people have no access? Since Warkentin only hints at, but does not develop in depth, the spiritual powers of the written word, my observation must remain a question. If Warkentin does indeed link the private act of writing with divine inspiration, she is refining her earlier proposition in *Chastity Belts* of art as a holy sacrament in which all can participate.

Mary's polemical arguments are not nearly as effective in justifying the artist's place as the publication of her essay "There is no Place Like Home" which elicits four hundred letters from around the world in defence of the *Maedchenheim*. Through her writing, Mary gives public witness to Marta's sacrifice for the good of the community. She also encourages four hundred other women to voice their stories. Marta responds "It is not so bad for women to write" (97).

*Chastity Belts* and *Mary and Martha* explore a range of aspects of women's physical, spiritual, and emotional lives. Breaking the traditional code of silence, Warkentin gives voice to women's experiences in the public arena of the theatre. Through dance performance in *Chastity Belts*, Warkentin encourages a renewed appreciation of the woman's body as an avenue towards an intimate communion with God. *Mary and Martha* works towards an appreciation of writing that serves the spiritual and aesthetic needs of the community. Although *Mary and Martha* has not yet been produced, a reworked version will make a valuable contribution to Canadian women's theatre as well as to the sizeable body of Canadian-Mennonite writing.

An interesting feature of both works is the presentation of history from a contemporary feminist perspective. In Warkentin's plays, the Beguinage and the *Maedchenheim* provide women with temporary refuges that are ultimately destroyed by the patriarchal power structures of the church. Warkentin's plays contain references to the Bible, the *Martyr's Mirror*, Christian saints, and past and present accounts of suffering that serve to connect women's experiences across time and space. Although Warkentin maintains opposition between male and female, her plays hold out hope for living an integral life in less than edenic circumstances. In *Chastity Belts*, Julie finds a place to dance within the confining walls of her anchorage and in *Mary and Martha*, Emma exercises a loving spirit of humour and playfulness within the strict rules of the *Maedchenheim*. Perhaps her characters' optimism for change and growth reflects Warkentin's personal view of her position in Mennonite society. Warkentin couches her critique of Mennonite society within a sympathetic portrayal of Mennonite history. She criticizes the Mennonite failure and affirms the Mennonite potential in creating a safe place for women. Warkentin's dramatic utopias hold out the possibility for a community that values its Martas and Marys alike.

# CHAPTER 3

# VERN THIESSEN: A DISSENTING VOICE

## I. Introduction: Thiessen's Place

A story reflecting communal history and values gives people a sense of belonging, purpose, and meaning in life. As the story is transmitted from one generation to next, it provides access to the past and relates the individual to people gone before. Just as retelling the story links the past with the present, it also unites the storyteller with a body of listeners. But what happens when the teller warps the story — when, in Al Reimer's words, the storyteller no longer speaks "for and from the established centre but rather from the dissident frontier"?[118]

Playwright Vern Thiessen writes from a position of a geographical as well as a personal "frontier." Born and raised in a Mennonite family, Thiessen participated enthusiastically in church activities at the First Mennonite Church (General Conference) in Winnipeg.[119] However, during his student years at the University of Winnipeg Thiessen began questioning religious orthodoxy and distanced himself from congregational life. Today, Thiessen lives and works in Edmonton, Alberta, far removed from the Winnipeg Mennonite subculture, maintaining only a loose connection with organized Christianity.

Despite Thiessen's limited involvement with Mennonite life, his dramatic work employs elements of biblical narrative and oral delivery, both important features of Mennonite culture. Thiessen quips that through "jokes and stories at home" he learned to

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[118] *Mennonite Literary Voices* 55.

[119] Members of this congregation launched the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre in 1972.

"string a tale together."[120] Biblical themes, especially Old Testament narratives such as taking possession of a homeland, receiving a divine calling, and belonging to the chosen people are featured strongly in Thiessen's work. Here, I will concentrate on two of Thiessen's plays that deal directly with Mennonite subject matter, *The Courier* and *The Resurrection of John Frum.*[121]

In almost every way, Thiessen subverts the consolidating power of Mennonite narrative. His plays contain familiar Mennonite stories that separate rather than unify individuals with their communal past. In *The Courier*, for example, the protagonist recalls elements of Mennonite stories only to discover that, once these stories are detached from community life, they cease to sustain him in unfamiliar circumstances. Torn from the collective, the narrative fails to give meaning to individual life. In *The Resurrection of John Frum*, the Christian narrative of divine calling, undeniably a powerful myth of purpose, actually frustrates the protagonist's search for direction. In Thiessen's plays, the attempt at retelling a narrative ruptures past and present and alienates individuals and community. The narrative that is meant to provide purpose and belonging becomes a story *about* purpose and belonging. Thiessen reveals that the Mennonite narrative is constantly reinvented for the purpose of survival, thereby compromising its claim to official truth. Storymaking, not passing on, is Thiessen's concern, as he seeks to discover answers to the following questions: What makes a story come about? Who controls what is said and left unsaid? By what authority and for what purpose are stories created and preserved?

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[120] Vern Thiessen, personal interview, 16 Oct. 1993.

[121] A list of play productions for *The Courier* and *The Resurrection of John Frum* as well as for other plays by Vern Thiessen appears in Appendix B.

Before examining the manner in which Thiessen confronts Mennonite narrative, I will summarize particular narratives that have traditionally defined what it means to be Mennonite. First, Mennonites have a strong sense of divine calling. They are called to live a pure and righteous life at the invitation of Christ himself. The exclusive "brotherhood" of early Anabaptism may be analogous to a North American evangelical emphasis on personal conversion and commitment to Christ. Altar calls, an invitation to personal acceptance of "God's call", feature prominently in evangelical revival meetings. That Mennonites in Manitoba adopted many evangelical practices is well documented by historians.[122] Second, the Mennonites have for long periods lived without a homeland. They migrated from place to place looking for safety and freedom to practice their beliefs. Displacement history informs stories about the innocence and victimhood of Mennonite people. Third, the *Martyr's Mirror* and other stories about persecution reinforce an identity based on suffering. These stories honour people as they suffer and die for an ideal: they are distinguished by their death.

While individuals may be remembered for their suffering and death, individual achievements are quickly rendered anonymous by being absorbed by the community. This is the fourth mark of Mennonite distinctiveness: collective accomplishments are deemed more important than individual success. Although Swiss Mennonites identify more strongly with the doctrine of humility, the Russian Mennonite stream also subordinates the individual to the group. Even biographies of prominent Mennonite leaders celebrate their accomplishments only in that they have served the greater good of the community.[123] The group, however, need not observe humility or fear pride. Morally and practically, the group is considered superior to all other groups: *we* are obedient to God's special calling, and *we* run the cleanest farms.[124] This group pride, too, is challenged by Vern Thiessen.

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[122] James Urry, "Private Lives" 11. Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940*, 447-97.

Obviously, in a community where a celebration of individual success would be interpreted as personal pride, there is little room for the individual voice. Imaginative writing in this context is suspect, for it assumes a degree of subjective autonomy. Of necessity, writers speak apart from the community even when they are a part of it. Thiessen transforms this tension in the ethnic ethos into a theatrical strategy. He delivers his challenge to Mennonite myths through the medium of monologue, using the sole performer on stage to resemble at once the author, who often speaks in isolation, and the storyteller, who spellbinds his audience. As we shall see, Vern Thiessen uses solo performance as an effective vehicle for examining his Mennonite heritage and the artist's place therein.

## II. Monologue: Prophesy or Madness?

A striking feature of Thiessen's plays is their reliance on monologue. Thiessen's first play, *The Courier* (1988), is a monodrama. This was followed by *The Resurrection of John Frum* (1991), a two-person play with substantial soliloquies. Other dialogical pieces include *I Fell in Love with an Eel* (1991) and *Dawn Quixote* (1993). *Cressida* (1995) is a compilation of various narratives, the strongest of which are character monologues. Thiessen's latest play, *Blowfish* (1996), returns to the one-man performance. An equally significant feature of Thiessen's plays is their treatment of personal alienation, sometimes bordering on insanity. *Blowfish*, for example, depicts a lonely caterer's descent into madness. In a wrenching soliloquy in *Cressida*, a Desert Storm veteran enacts the agony of mental and emotional collapse. The messenger in *The Courier* imagines himself the victim of a conspiracy he does not understand. The protagonist in *The Resurrection of John Frum* succumbs to the teachings of a fringe religious cult. *I Fell in Love with an Eel* ends with the irreparable breakdown of relationships. Although many of Thiessen's works display clever comedic writing — *Blowfish* and *The Resurrection of John Frum* especially come to mind — only the children's play *Dawn Quixote* is a true comedy in which obstacles are successfully surmounted and relationships established.

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[123] "Ein Mann, der sein Wissen und Konnen dem Wohl der mennonitischen Gemeinschaft gewidmet hat. Man kann wohl sagen, dass er in der Hingabe seiner Krafte fur diese Gemeinschaft sein Lebensziel sah [A man who dedicated his knowledge and ability to the well-being of the Mennonite community. One might say that he saw his life's goal in the giving of his powers for this community]," wrote Abram Berg about the distinguished teacher and editor, Dietrich Epp. Foreword, *Dietrich Heinrich Epp: Aus Seinem Leben, Wirken und Selbstaufgezeichneten Erinnerungen* by Abram Berg (Saskatoon: Heese, 1973).

[124] James Urry speaks of an "insidious . . . (t)riumphant (h)istory" which "chronicled Mennonite success, emphasizing how Mennonites...were the best or the most blessed, while at the same time it deprecated the way of life of their neighbours and fellow citizens." "Truth and Fantasy," *Embracing* 105.

To establish the alienation theme, Thiessen makes effective use of the theatrical convention of monologue, from *mono logos*, solitary speech. Solitary speech, however, is always achieved at the expense of communal dialogue. Individuality indicates marginality as well as exceptionality. According to Ken Frieden, "the monologist steers a course between divinity and madness."[125] While early English drama retains a link between monologue and prayer, Renaissance drama develops the soliloquy as an expression of evil and inner turmoil. In light of his own biography, it could be said that Thiessen harnesses

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[125] Ken Frieden, *Genius and Monologue* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 18.

Nietzsche's madman after the God of the Mennonites is dead.

*Biographical* monodramas preserve history and affirm values the community holds dear. Their goal is to present an admired historical person through the public reading of documents and letters. This kind of drama, developed during the late nineteenth century, was one of the few theatrical presentations Christians endorsed.[126] In this genre we may expect to find plays entitled "The Life and Times of Menno Simmons" or "Readings of Arnold Dyck." Thiessen, so far, has avoided this genre.

*Autobiographical* monodramas have been called "creative confessions."[127] The actor bonds with the audience by telling them his life story. Dramatist Spalding Gray, who prefers the term "autobiographical performance," uses the audience as his confessor, confidant, and friend. In absence of faith in supernatural powers, monologue turns from communication with God to a dialogue with the community. In contrast with other monodramas, such as biographical and autobiographical ones, Thiessen's plays celebrate neither individual achievement nor communal bonding. Thiessen's one-man show *Blowfish* can be seen as a satire of autobiographical performance.[128] In trying to win the audience's trust and approval the character ends up their laughing stock. During the performance of *Blowfish*, the audience is wined and dined in a mock fine-dining establishment. Sharing a meal recalls the ritual of communion and Thiessen's satirical Last Supper appropriately ends in death. The character finally creates a bond between himself and the audience by staging his own suicide and forcing the audience to witness it.

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[126] John S. Gentile, "The One-Person Show in America: From Catechu to Broadway," *Studies in Popular Culture* 9.1 (1986) 23-38.

[127] Spalding Gray, qtd. in Jordan R. Young, *Acting Solo: The Art of One-Man Shows* (Beverly Hills: Moonstone, 1989) 26.

[128] My comments on *Blowfish* are based on a public reading of the play that I attended at Workshop West Theatre in Edmonton.

Autobiographical performance breaks down the "fourth wall". There is no theatrical artifice; performer and character are one. The unmasked performer sits down and says, "I'm going to tell you a story." However, in *The Courier* and *The Resurrection of John Frum*, Thiessen maintains a distance between the audience and the performer by establishing theatrical framing devices, such as: the "fourth wall", a detailed set of a bygone era, recognizable character types and linguistic patterns, and a one- or two-act play structure. These framing devices inhibit the communion between the actor and the audience. The character's isolation highlights external forces impinging on his life.

### III. *The Courier*: Breaking Consensus

Thiessen's acclaimed *The Courier* is set during the Second World War. It was a time when a small number of Mennonites still living in Russia pinned their hopes on Hitler's military force to deliver them from Stalin's brutal rule. Some of them forgot all about their pacifist convictions and actually crossed over to the German forces. David Dyck is a young Mennonite courier in the Nazi army. Stationed in Czechoslovakia near the end of the war, David delivers important documents for Kommandant Miller across the Eastern front. Travelling along the front line is fraught with danger, because the Germans round up men at random and send them to fight at the front. Returning home to Russia is certainly not an option for the Mennonite defector; hence, David relies on his wits and an ample supply of cigarettes to stay alive.

The play opens in an derelict barrack. David Dyck enters, wearing a German army uniform and carrying a brown envelope. He collapses on a bed, exhausted, but springs up again, trying to stay awake. He ransacks through his bag looking for food; instead, he finds an old photograph, to which he raises a bottle of vodka: "Prosit, Fouda, prosit!" (3) The photograph of David's father incites the dramatic action. David attempts to write a letter to his father, of the "How are you? I am fine" variety, but quickly abandons the idea realizing that "there's no point. You wouldn't get it anyway" (4). Yet the presence of the father remains as David begins speaking to him about the events of the past few months.

David brags about how he came to be promoted as personal courier to Kommandant Miller, how cleverly he obtains a seat on the train by bribing passengers with cigarettes, and how he has barely escaped front roundups, not once but twice. David talks about recent deliveries that take him from Karlsbad to Prague to Eger in a short span of four days. During his travels, he is confronted with the dehumanizing effects of war: a Nazi officer beats him up just for the fun of it; he sees concentration camp prisoners being herded along by the SS; disenchanted soldiers make their way to the front. Up until this point in the performance, the narrative has remained in the past. The narrative begins with general anecdotes, then shifts to recent adversities and winds tighter and tighter towards the present tense until David's reminiscences are constricted to a few days. The following passage near the top of the play indicates a wider narrative scope than a panicked account of an air raid near the end:

> a Georgian volunteer . . . came through camp. Wanted into the Vlasov Army Division. A Russian who wants to fight Father Stalin for butchering his own people.... So I say to him: "What the hell! It's never a problem for me to pull a few strings." (4)

Compare this matter-of-fact description with:

> Suddenly, the alarm goes. Air raid. The Americans must be attacking. Or worse, the Russians.
>
> I must deliver this letter. I ask everyone. I look everywhere. No one listens. They're all running for shelter.
>
> Bombs start falling. I find a shelter and crawl in. There are perhaps twelve of us: Women, children, mostly. And so much noise: more screaming and crying, for two hours it never stops, I can't even think!...
>
> Everything shakes.
>
> You hold on to anything.
>
> You wonder if the bunker will hold.
>
> (Pause)
>
> Oh, God, why is he doing this to me!? (25-6)

The final existential cry ends a harried account of four days of running around. Thiessen effectively uses this concentration of time to highlight the utter powerlessness and isolation of the young courier.

The air-raid story returns the narrative back to the present. Finding the camp abandoned, David panics. Has Kommandant Miller set him up as a spy? Is the Russian front moving towards the camp? David tears open the envelope he was meant to deliver to an address in Eger, expecting to find top-secret information. Instead, the message contains instructions to a baker: "No crescent rolls Sunday, please" (27). Indeed, David has been set up, but not in the glorious role of a spy. Kommandant Miller seems to have used the young courier for errand-boy duties, but David has no time to consider the ramifications. Opening classified information, no matter how mundane the information turns out to be, is a treasonous act. David must decide his future. Russia means certain death; Germany, a similar fate. David decides to go to Canada. He leaves the stage disguised as a Czechoslovakian farm boy, whistling softly to himself.

Thiessen creates dramatic tension with anecdotal storytelling contrasted with panicked movements. David repeatedly glances at "the window" of the barrack. He is startled at his own shadow. He smokes continuously. Monologue heightens the tension even more. The solo *tour de force* emphasizes David's entrapment in the barrack, the mental and emotional strain, and seething anger he experiences.

The solo performance also allows for a few moments of pensive introspection, but not the introspection available at the end of one's life, when one discerns God's providence at work in seemingly unconnected events. Thiessen does not allow David the luxury to reflect on and organize his chaotic experiences into a meaningful life story. His attempts to organize his thoughts and give meaning to events ends in confusion. In this way, Thiessen exposes the artificiality of life-time stories in which the present moment organizes the confusion of the past. David tries to gain control over his situation by recounting his experiences, but individual stories of David's travels as a courier and his suspicions of Miller are strung along a larger narrative of the wild-goose chase. David pretends to be in control of the narrative and repeatedly demands respect, but the smaller unheroic stories he tells have the opposit effect of compromising his character.

Half way through the performance, childhood memories, prompted by additional props in the bag, interrupt David's wartime stories. At this point the tone shifts from bragging to nostalgic musing of happier times in Russia. David's address to his father is also more direct. Taking a Bible out of the bag, David says, "One of your Bibles... [beat] I don't get a chance to read much these days" (12). There is also a letter from Uncle Peter in Canada "asking if we come visit. Huh" (12). The letter is then forgotten until the end of the play when David decides to flee to Canada. A music box/cigarette holder bearing three Soviet stars reminds David of his family working together at harvest time. David's father was awarded the box for "ploughing the most fields one harvest, remember" (12). Ironically, David's father was later arrested for treason for "singing hymns in the fields at harvest time" (16). The music box elicits a story of pig slaughtering. In Low German fashion,[129] Thiessen strings the audience along:

> Hey! Wait a minute. What did we call that when all of us got together at harvest time? You know, all of us: Mama and John and Mary and Uncle Franz and the neighbours came by — what did we call that? Schweenechast! That's it! Schweenechast! The Pig Wedding! The last big slaughter before winter. Boy oh boy that was fun.... I remember one time . . . (12-13)

What follows is an entertaining yarn about a practical joke played on David's kid brother.

The Pig Wedding story highlights the virtuoso skill of the storyteller. The story works as a humorous tale when addressed to the audience, as to the absentee father, but when David uses humour to relate to Kommandant Miller, the jokes fall flat. For example, David recounts a conversation in which Miller asks him what the hell a Mennonite is and David responds:

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[129] Thiessen's humorous anecdotal storytelling is similar in tone to Jack Thiessen's Low German tales found in *Embracing the World* and *A Sackful of Plautdietsch.*

> "Well, that means I belong to Christ and I belong to any country that won't make me fight, won't make me speak their language and won't kick me out if I get rich." [HE LAUGHS] Miller didn't like that too much. (14-15)

In defence of the Mennonite German dialect, David tries again:

> "Allow me to explain, Kommandant Miller. Our people are originally from the Netherlands, but when we emigrated to the Ukraine we began to speak German like...we made Borscht: Throw a lot of stuff into a pot and hope it tastes like something!" I thought this little joke might help. (15)

Thiessen's jokes are sure to entertain the audience, especially the Mennonite contingent, but in the internal world of the play, David's little stories elicit a hostile reaction:

> "Dyck," he said to me, "You are nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing. You come from the Russian Ukraine, yet you say you're not Ukrainian or Russian. You say you're a German, yet you can't speak the language. You claim to be some kind of pacifist and yet here you are in the army. You don't have a nationality, you don't have any real language, you don't even know what you believe. And any man - or even a boy like you - who doesn't have a nationality, a language or a belief, is nothing. Do you understand that, David? You are a nothing." (15-16)

Miller's description exposes a fundamental truth about Mennonite identity as a hybrid culture without a land or even a language to call its own. According to Miller, David fails the Aryan test and hence is stripped of dignity. Miller's reaction also exposes David's inability to connect stories of the Mennonite past with his present predicament. David's only successful articulation of Mennonite identity is a humorous tale about a pig; the rest of Mennonite history is empty rhetoric, raw material to be shaped and manipulated as circumstances require. For example, he tries to legitimize his heritage by presenting Mennonites as "Black-Sea Germans" (21) or "German colonists" (15), but to no avail. In Nazi Germany, Miller controls the meaning of "Mennonite," and, from his position, "Mennonite" means nothing.

Unlike typical biographical monodrama, *The Courier* is not a biography of an admirable hero. Thiessen's presentation of "authentic" documents, such as photographs, a letter, the music box, elicit stories of ordinary farm life, family, and neighbours. The protagonist functions more like an anti-hero. David's assignment in the Nazi army works not for the public good, but for evil, just as his grand adventure turns out to be petty — about crescent rolls.

Thiessen frustrates a desire for an authoritative interpretation of events. The powerful myth of God's guiding providence finds no hold in *The Courier* where time is atrophied and the course of events ever more chaotic. The audience never attains superior awareness of the dramatic action. Like David, they are confused about the meaning of events. Thiessen challenges a sanitized view of Mennonite identity. Through David's association with the Nazi army, Thiessen challenges the Mennonite myth of pacifism. Understandably, Mennonites are reluctant to confront their history of Nazi sympathy, which Urry points out was a sad reality in Russia as well as in Canada.[130] Thiessen furthermore challenges the Mennonite myth of victimhood. *The Courier* in no way denies the suffering Mennonites experienced in Russia, but it counters it with David's indifference towards the suffering of others and as such compromises Mennonite innocence.

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[130] Urry documents pro-fascist sentiment among the *Russlaender* population in the 1930s. He also mentions anti-Semitic prejudices in the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia. "Who are the Mennonites?" *Archives Europeennes Sociologie* 24 (1983): 252-4.

On a personal note, Thiessen explains that his friendship with a fellow university student of Jewish descent contributed to his increasing skepticism towards the Mennonite faith, which in Thiessen's experience retains a negative attitude towards the Jewish people. Personal interview, 16 Oct. 1993.

*The Courier* disrupts historical continuity that links past, present and future. Thiessen reveals that a story doesn't give access to a past, but that rather it constantly reinvents it for the purpose of survival. As the courier reinvents the past, so Thiessen retells the Mennonite narrative of emigration with an instance that is radically different, supplying the audience with an emigration myth that they have never heard before. Ironically Thiessen's story may be closer to the truth than other Mennonite myths.

## IV. *The Resurrection of John Frum*: Testing the Christian Story

*The Resurrection of John Frum* is a two-act comedy about two people trying to convert each other to their respective faiths. Isaac, a sincere young Christian, gives witness of his new-born faith to a park-bench bum named Syd, who himself is a believer in a Melanesian cargo cult. The young man and the old derelict form a friendship based on their mutual need to feel important. Together they seek to define their purpose in life by looking for a divine calling. Studies of the Bible and other literature of the evangelical press prove fruitless. At first, Isaac is hesitant to consider the claims of the Melanesian cult that hails John Frum as the Messiah; but Syd's revelation at the end of the first act that he is God, and his proposal to anoint Isaac as the great prophet John Frum, challenges the young Christian's rejection of other faiths. The conflict reaches a climax when Isaac must choose between his commitment to biblical truth and an opportunity for personal meaning and fulfillment.

The play's dramatic conflict revolves around Isaac and Syd's rival claims to truth.

Each man has a story, a myth, that attempts to explain reality in universal terms. The play's episodic narrative structure, discontinuous in time and place, deliberately counterpoints the play's subject matter of timeless myths of cosmic import. General themes of purpose and belonging find expression through informal dialogue. Thiessen's humorous rapid dialogue is set in contrast to the monologues that express the infinite myths. The scene where Syd pretends he is God and tries to persuade Isaac to accept the role of John Frum is a striking example of contrasting language patterns. (scene 13) Syd's seductive description of Melanesia is a measured account of John Frum's salvation plan:

> The legend has it you will arrive near Karapanaman. And your followers will burst out and worship you like ash from the crater. And the noise they make will echo the rumblings of the mountain. And the island will explode with the joyous cries of the people. . . .
>
> And after all that is done, the people return to Karapanaman and you finally speak to them. You say: . . . "Do you believe?" (53-56)

Isaac's rebuttal of Syd's myth, like Syd's rebuttal of Isaac in other segments, is a rapid exchange:

> ISAAC. What kind of time frame are we looking at?
>
> SYD. Time frame?
>
> ISAAC. Fifty years, two thousand years. You know, am I going to live to see the promised land?
>
> SYD. All in good time, Isaac, all in good time.
>
> ISAAC. Will I die?
>
> SYD. What?

> ISAAC. Will I have to sacrifice myself?
>
> SYD. I don't know.
>
> ISAAC. You don't know? You're suppose to know everything.
>
> SYD. That depends on how you carry out my will. (58)

Although *The Resurrection of John Frum* was produced at a mainstream Canadian theatre, the rhetoric of the play functions within the specific speech community of the evangelical faith. Religious phrases such as "calling", "salvation", and "Good News" run throughout the text. Within the framework of organized religion, these words are loaded with spiritual meaning, but in the mouth of a lonely soul, they lose their power to facilitate religious experience. Isaac's inability to express his faith outside the confines of summer Bible camp is made painfully clear in his explanation of a "calling":

> Well, it's like the feeling you get when — as if — the Holy Spirit is... [hesitation] calling you...it's more like...inside you, you know? Like a warm feeling... Rushing, over, or through — No...no, I — I can't explain it, it's... (18-19)

Testimonies of faith, meant to strengthen believers in a community of faith, also lose their power outside of the conventional religious "truth." For example, Syd's faith proclamation in the city streets rivals the zeal of the best doom's day preacher: "When John Frum actually returns (and it's going to happen soon, I know it) the world's going to see the start of a new age" (3), Syd cries out, unperturbed by strange looks of passersby. But Syd's gospel carries no spiritual authority in a world that does not share his truth.

Much of the play's humour emerges from the application of conventional religious terminology to a lunatic situation. And it is also in this bizarre juxtaposition of Christianity and cult that Thiessen challenges Christianity's exclusive claim to the truth.

In a sense, Syd is the more effective evangelist. At the end of the play, he remains committed to his story about John Frum and, although Isaac rejects the John Frum story, Syd succeeds in changing Isaac's perspective. At the end of the play, Syd is preaching the John Frum gospel as in the beginning, but Isaac is transformed from a confident Christian to one who questions and doubts.

In this two-person play, Isaac and Syd are the sole agents of the dramatic action, in which one blocks the proselytizing efforts of the other. Isaac and Syd represent thesis and antithesis; however, Thiessen deliberately confuses which one is which. Isaac upholds "the way, the truth, and the light" from a Christian standpoint, but Thiessen's characterization of the likeable Syd aligns the audience's sympathy with the supposed lunatic fringe. Thiessen's objective, however, is not to legitimize one myth at the expense of the another, but to stimulate thinking regarding the fundamental function of myth.

Thiessen works towards an appreciation of the narrative power of myth that gives people hope. In the play, Syd has a better understanding of myth's inspirational function than Isaac, who clings to a literal interpretation. At their first meeting, Syd perceives a similarity of purpose between the John Frum and the Christian story: "You see Isaac? We're both after the same thing: Hope and happiness" (12). When at the end of the play Isaac demands Syd forget about John Frum, Syd pleads, "I'll do everything you ask. But let me keep my story" (82). More than food, clothes, community, or anything else that Christian charity can offer him, the John Frum story gives Syd a reason for living.

For Syd, as for Thiessen, the hopeful element of the Christian story is far more important than its factual reality. For this reason, Syd can accept the "truth" of Isaac's story while maintaining personal allegiance to John Frum. Syd also embodies the fundamental core of the Christian faith. "I have no problem forgiving you," Syd says to Isaac. "I *love* you" (82, emphasis added). But Isaac does not respond in kind, because his love for Syd is conditional on Syd's renunciation of John Frum. Isaac's rejection of Syd discredits Christian pretensions of moral superiority. The play's final scene shows Isaac leading a Bible study group where he has more questions than answers about the faith. This final portrait demonstrates Syd's effective challenge to Christianity's exclusive claim to truth. At the beginning of my discussion, I called *The Resurrection of John Frum* a comedy, but perhaps the play can best be understood as an inverted comedy in which a possible reconciliation between two opposing view points is not realized.

In *The Courier* and *The Resurrection of John Frum* Thiessen challenges narratives that are at the core of the Mennonite identity. Thiessen's stories about pacifism, faithfulness, suffering and witnessing present repeated failure of putting these communal values into individual practice. *The Courier* demonstrates that Mennonite values failed to challenge Nazi ideology. *The Resurrection of John Frum* demonstrates that outside the (artificial) support structures of church, Bible camp, or study group, the Christian faith cannot easily withstand the challenge of other truth claims.

As in Thiessen's other plays, the protagonists in these plays appear outside a stable community life. They must fashion themselves an identity out of scraps of history and memory. Thiessen consistently frustrates the protagonists' search for belonging and purpose. When faced with opposition, their patchwork identity unravels into meaningless rhetoric. In *The Resurrection of John Frum*, Thiessen demonstrates that stories told outside of a community context are either absurd, like Syd's John Frum story, or impotent, like Isaac's evangelical faith. In *The Courier*, Thiessen suggests that a conventional articulation of a Mennonite identity is irrelevant as a guiding force in new circumstances.

Beyond challenging specific Mennonite narratives, Thiessen probes deeper into the problem of communication itself. I began my discussion of Vern Thiessen by asking by what authority and for what purpose stories are created and preserved. From the foregoing it is clear that individuals assert little agency in the creation of myth. Rather, external forces determine to what extent the characters' stories shape and interpret their life. In a world hostile to difference, communication between characters inevitably breaks down. In terms of the playwright's communication with the audience, Thiessen proves himself a superb communicator. His plays encourage audience members to listen and evaluate the characters' stories and, like Isaac at the Bible study, to leave the theatre ruminating "I don't know. I'll think about that" (65).

# CONCLUSION

In the Introduction, I distinguished between the Swiss Mennonite and the Russian Mennonite evaluations of art. The Swiss paradigm of *art as storytelling* values communal memory in artistic creation. According to this paradigm, Mennonite theatre enacts the Mennonite story and in its re-enactment shapes and re-interprets an older collective memory. The Russian approach of *art as prophesy* values artistic freedom above all. Adherents of this persuasion respect an artist as the voice of dissent within the group or as "a voice from the fringe." It is helpful to sum up by referring to the elements of prophesy and storytelling that find voice in the dramatic works of Veralyn Warkentin and Vern Thiessen.

## Prophesy: Discontinuity

In biblical history, prophets before the Babylonian exile rebuked the Hebrew people for their decadent self-satisfied lifestyle. They criticized current religious practices, redefined community ideals, and inverted prevailing priorities. Prophets, hated and shunned, often lived on the fringe of society. The artist-as-prophet paradigm focuses on the relationship between artists and the people for which they write. Playwrights must stake out a position from which to critique their community. At first glance it appears that Warkentin takes her position inside, Thiessen outside of, community life; however, further analysis reveals that the relationship is more ambiguous and complex. Rather, both Warkentin's and Thiessen's works dramatize the creative tensions that arise when artists identify emotionally with their heritage but at the same time critically examine it.

In writing against a traditional Mennonite view of art and women, Warkentin writes against the established centre. As an artist and woman, Warkentin's personal identity is located on the fringe of what has been labelled "the Anabaptist vision." Yet Warkentin works her way to the centre as she affirms Mennonite experiences and values. Hence, in her play *Mary and Martha*, Warkentin's criticism of Mennonite obsession with preservation and isolation does not negate the historical experience that gave rise to this obsession.

Warkentin's plays strive to resolve conflict and create dialogue with the community. Not content with a surface solution, Warkentin probes deeper into irreconcilable conflicts. *Chastity Belts* explores the possibility of a female reformation which functions in direct defiance of male authority, whereas *Mary and Martha* remembers and transmits history to the younger generation while at the same time subverting official versions of Mennonite history. Warkentin's empathy, understanding, and acceptance of history does not merely serve to validate tradition; rather, it bonds women together to fight against the patriarchal power structures of Mennonite society.

Thiessen creates an intellectual theatre, a place where people's assumptions will be challenged and where the relevance of Mennonite stories are tested. He explores narratives from other traditions that also provide purpose and hope. Yet Thiessen's obsession with identity belies his distanced stance towards Mennonite society. Mennonites, historically and theologically alienated from broader society, face a chronic identity crisis. The problem of naming their identities rings through the soul-searching discourse of Thiessen's characters.

Both Veralyn Warkentin and Vern Thiessen create a theatre that stages truths about Mennonite society. The four plays discussed in depth in my thesis — *Chastity Belts*, *Mary and Martha*, *The Courier*, and The Resurrection of John Frum — confront inconsistencies in the Mennonite faith and expose dark incidents nobody wants to talk about. According to James Urry, a noted Mennonite scholar, Mennonites are in the process of revising a consensual view of history.[131] There is a healthy debate about what really went on in the past. As Thiessen and Warkentin challenge the old stories of utopia and innocence, they fulfil the prophetic function of art.

## Storytelling: Continuity

In biblical history, the Hebrews reclaimed their communal heritage during the Babylonian exile by writing down the old stories of oral tradition. The scribe was a revered individual steeped in the knowledge and tradition of his people. Thiessen and Warkentin are intimately familiar with Mennonite history. Stories of Mennonite colonies in Russia and immigration to Canada feature prominently in their work. However, the history they stage is not a triumphant one. What they stage is the insignificant, the confusing, shameful, and compromised legacy of the Mennonites. Warkentin's *Mary and Martha* and Thiessen's *The Courier* in particular present a heritage of suffering and twisted ideals.

The Mennonite world-view, suspicious and utilitarian in its outlook, may not encourage theatre arts as a suitable career choice, yet its emphasis on the spoken word, rather than the icon or the symbol, provides playwrights with a voice for personal expression. The dramatic works discussed display a profound love for language that is part of Mennonite culture. Both playwrights employ the languages of worship and debate and lace these with the device of word-play in the same way that religious leaders do. What their plays may lack in stage decor, they compensate for in crafted text. Religious rhetoric in particular is skillfully used in their articulation of religious feeling, where conventional religious language becomes inadequate for the protagonists' spiritual journey.

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[131] Urry, "Truth and Fantasy: The Writing of Russian Mennonite Histories," Mennonite Mirror Feb. 1990, rpt. in *Embracing* 105.

Although Warkentin and Thiessen are united in their historical imagination, they differ in their objective for staging Mennonite history. Warkentin recounts history to facilitate healing and forgiveness and create understanding between generations. In *Chastity Belts* and *Mary and Martha*, she creates a sense of communion with past "saints," including Russian missionaries, biblical figures, medieval mystics, and heroines from the *Martyr's Mirror*. Warkentin limits herself to telling women's stories only; her mission to forgive and to heal does not extend to the male members of her community. She attempts to connect women with their spiritual and ethnic heritage by defining women's experience as antithetical to men's.

Vern Thiessen adopts a more cynical perspective towards Mennonite history by interrogating the process of storymaking itself. *The Courier* demonstrates that the Mennonite story is constantly reinvented for the purpose of survival; *The Resurrection of John Frum* questions the Christian story as a guiding force in today's world. Since the Mennonite story is constantly being reinvented, a symbolic connection between past and present is impossible, because there is nothing to connect. In this world, a meaningful exchange between individual and community is also futile. Hence, Thiessen's characters appear as solitary individuals, alienated both from the audience and from each other.

It has been said that a large part of self-understanding is the continual development of life stories.[132] Warkentin strives to expand Mennonite identity by presenting stories about women and artists. Her plays continue the collective narratives of the Mennonite faith in ways that affirm the values of the initial Anabaptist reforms. Thiessen's plays break down traditional Mennonite narratives and his concerns with Mennonite identity operate primarily as deconstructive.

## Who is Listening?

In Chapter 1, I noted that with the disappearance of a clearly separate Mennonite lifestyle, literary works gain in importance as tangible markers of identity.[133] Drama, too, is involved in this process, with the usual tension between a material script and evanescent performance complicating the issue. Theatre can hardly satisfy urban Mennonites who yearn for objective indicators, and locate their ethnic identity in art objects that can be touched, scrutinized, filed, and marked as "distinctively Mennonite." There are few indications that the Mennonite press, whose coverage of drama has hitherto been scant and sporadic, can be relied upon to help make Mennonite theatre more "tangible" to its audiences.

Reflecting on increasing assimilation of Mennonite culture into the Canadian mainstream, Al Reimer observes:

> Our best writers . . . challenge us as Mennonites, to revitalize us by calling our

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[132] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 233.

[133] See pages 29-30.

> very identity into question, to test and probe our lives — our very souls — to see what makes us tick. And we must pay attention to them now, while they are still speaking to us directly by creating art out of their Mennonite experience. In a few years this vibrant, crucial phase of our culture will be a thing of the past as the best of our writers and artists will move on to wider and non-Mennonite themes and subjects and take their rightful places among Canadian artists speaking to all Canadians.[134]

According to Reimer, Mennonite acculturation puts an ongoing artistic exploration of Mennonite distinctiveness in some doubt. It is just as doubtful, however, that such a distinctiveness can vanish altogether.

Contemporary Mennonite writers occupy a unique position in Canadian and Canadian-Mennonite drama. They are the last generation to have heard stories about Russia, persecution, and immigration directly from those who have experienced it first-hand. It is difficult to speculate about the question which features of that heritage will become enduring, defining, "essential" to the new Mennonite identity. Undoubtedly, however, the still "new" Mennonite experience in Canada continues to add new chapters to Mennonite history, so that it too eventually will come to constitute a heritage. Whether distinctively Mennonite theatre will be a part of it remains to be seen.

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[134] Reimer, "Who's Afraid of Mennonite Art?" *Mennonite Mirror* Jan. 1989, rpt. in *Embracing the World* 74.

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# APPENDIX A

## Productions of Veralyn Warkentin's Plays

*Elephants Face East*
CBC Radio. December 1992.

*We'll Do Lunch*
Short Shots. Manitoba Associations of Playwrights. Winnipeg. April 1992. Director, Nancy Drake. Performer, Lora Schroeder.

*Chastity Belts*
Caritas Company of Cats. Winnipeg Fringe Festival. July 1992. Director, Veralyn Warkentin. Performer, Susan Pickering.

*A Day in the Dock*
Manitoba Provincial Judges Court. Victoria. May 1993.

*Ooh La La Show*
Marnie Cooke Presents. Winnipeg Fringe Festival. July 1993. Director, Marnie Cooke.

*Family Rebellion*
Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre. The Deaf Centre. 11-13 March 1993. Directors, Veralyn Warkentin and Jennifer Kilimnik. Performer, Veralyn Warkentin.

*Like the Sun*
Tarra Players. Irish Club Theatre, Winnipeg. 14 August 1995. Directors, Carol McQuarrie and Pat McAvoy.
Irish Fest '95, Milwaukee, WI. 1995
Gaelic Park Players, Chicago. May 1996.
Lough Gur Amateur Dramatic Society. Honey Fitz Theatre, Lough Gur, Limerick, Ireland. 21-22 June 1996. Director, John McGrath.

# APPENDIX B

## Productions of Vern Thiessen's Plays

*The Courier*

Festival One. Agassiz Theatre. Manitoba Theatre Centre Warehouse, Winnipeg. May 1987. Director, Ann Hodges. Dramaturge, Larry Desrochers. Performer, Vern Thiessen.
Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre. Planetarium Theatre, Winnipeg. October 1987.
From the Ground Up. Theatre Centre, Toronto. May 1988.
Edmonton Fringe Festival. Acacia Hall. August 1988.
Access Network, CKUA Radio, Edmonton. Spring 1992.
Lakeland College, Lloydminster, AB. October 1993.
Winnipeg Fringe Festival. July 1997.

*The Resurrection of John Frum*

National Arts Centre Atelier Theatre, Ottawa. April 1990. Director Gil Osborne. Dramaturge Frank Moher. Performers John Koensgen and Donald Carrier. (produced as *The Return of John Frum*)
Theatre Projects. Prairie Theatre Exchange Second Stage, Winnipeg. November 1991. Director, Michael Nathanson. Performers, Alan Williams and Martine Friesen.

*I Fell in Love with an Eel*

University of Alberta Drama Department. January 1991. Director, James McTeague.
Death and Taxes Theatre. Toronto and Winnipeg Fringe 1991. Director, Vern Thiessen. Edmonton Fringe 1991. Director, Jonathan Christenson.

*Cressida* (by Vern Thiessen and Gerry Potter)

Workshop West. Kaasa Theatre, Edmonton. 7-17 April 1994. Director, Gerry Potter. Performers, Julien Arnold, Michelle Cecile Martin, and Anthony Santiago.

*Dawn Quixote*

Quest Theatre, Calgary. 1995. Director, Duval Lang.
Globe Theatre, Regina. 1995.
Goerdie productions, Montreal. Toured Quebec, eastern Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. 1996-97.

*Blowfish*

Staged Public Reading. Springboards New Play Festival sponsored by Workshop West Theatre. 3rd Space, Edmonton. 6 February 1996. Director, Myrna Wyat Selkirk. Performer, Raul Tome.
Northern Light Theatre (in co-production with the National Arts Centre in Ottawa), Edmonton. 6-17 November 1996. Director D. D. Kugler. Performer, John Kirkpatrick.

# APPENDIX C

## A Selection of Productions by the Winnipeg Mennonite Theatre

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1972 | *Und keiner hoert hin/And Nobody Listens* | Gert Neuendorf |
| 1973 | *Die Physiker* | Frederick Duerrenmatt |
| 1974 | *Drei lustige Ein-Akter:* | |
| | *Der Baer* | Anton Chekhov |
| | *De scheene Gelaeajenheit* | N. H. Unruh |
| | *Suppressed Desires* | S. Glaspell |
| | *Prozess Jesu* | Fabbri |
| 1975 | *Drei lustige Ein-Akter:* | |
| | *Der Schlinken der Gerechtigkeit* | A. Faber |
| | *The Income Tax* | P. Lynch |
| | *Wir armen, armen Maenner* | Horst-Gewecke |
| | *Der Geizhals* | Moliere |
| 1976 | *Drei lustige Ein-Akter:* | |
| | *Der Heiratsantrag* | Anton Chekhov |
| | *Mother's Day* | J. B. Priestly |
| | *Das fidele Wartezimmer* | Horst-Gewecke |
| | *Wir nimmt uns auf?* | Olga Rempel |
| 1977 | *Die Glasmenagerie* | Tennessee Williams |
| | *Trudje* | Susan Hiebert |
| 1978 | *The Servant of Two Masters* | Goldoni |
| 1979 | *Der Zigeuner Baron* | Johann Strauss |
| 1980 | *Leben des Galilei* | Bertold Brecht |
| 1981 | *Gianni Schicci* | Puccini |
| 1982 | *The Imaginary Invalid* | Moliere |
| | *Die Zauberflote* | Mozart |
| 1984 | *Hamlet, Prinz von Daenemark, trans. Schegel* | Shakespeare |
| 1985 | *Die Emigranten* | Walter Schlichting |
| 1986 | *Lady Windermere's Fan* | Oscar Wilde |
| 1987 | *The Courier* | Vern Thiessen |
| 1988 | *Full Circle* | Erich Maria Remarque |
| 1989 | *Sanctuary* | Esther Wiens |
| 1991 | *Biedermann und die Brandstifters* | Max Frisch |
| 1993 | *Family Rebellion* | Veralyn Warkentin |

Sources:

"Deutschsprachige Theatergruppen in Kanada [German Language Theatres in Canada]," *Deutsch als Muttersprache in Kanada: Berichte zur Gegenwartslage*, Deutsche Sprache in Europa und Ubersee: Berichte und Forschungen, Band 1, ed. Leopold Auburger, Heinz Kloss, and Heinz Rupp (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1977).

Veralyn Warkentin, "A Stage in the Community: WMT Since 1972," *Mennonite Mirror* Nov. 1990: 5-6.